EVERY WEEK MARCH 7, 1925

Western Story Magazine

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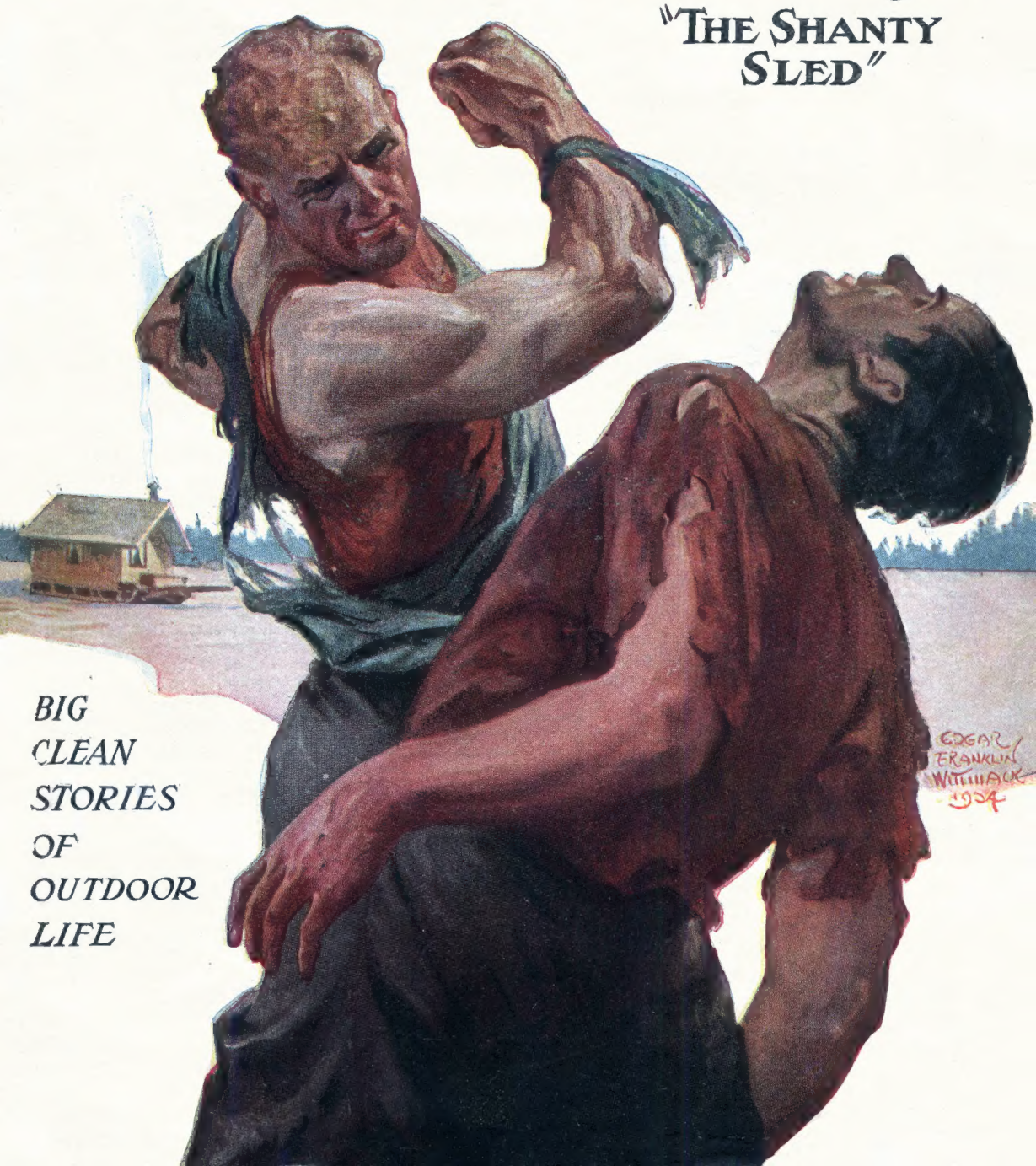
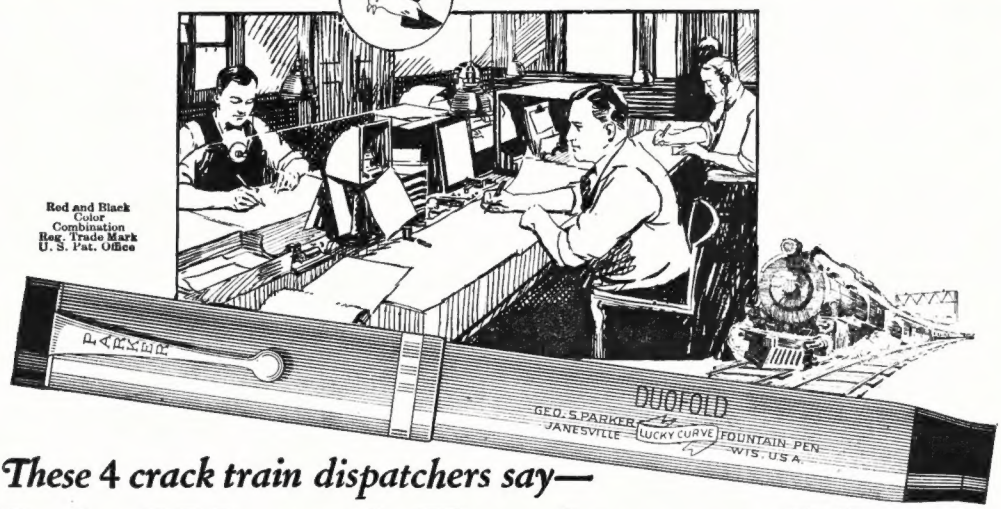


BIG CLEAN STORIES OF OUTDOOR LIFE

RIVALS THE BEAUTY OF THE SCARLET TANAGER



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Western Story Magazine

EVERY WEEK

Vol. L — Contents for March 7, 1925 — No. 3

EIGHT STORIES IN THIS ISSUE

ONE NOVEL

Blackie's Last Stand . . . *Max Brand* . . . 27

TWO SERIALS

The Shanty Sled . . . . *Hulbert Footner* . . . 1
A Five-part Story—Part One

Thornton, the Wolfer . . . *George Gilbert* . . . 87
A Four-part Story—Part Four

FIVE SHORT STORIES

The Hiding Place . . . . *Hugh F. Grinstead* . . 21
"Wings" of Reward . . . . *Robert J. Horton* . . 71
Land o' Freedom (Poem) . . *James Edward Hungerford* . 79
Greenbacks on the Trail . . . *Reginald C. Barker* . . 80
Another Notch . . . . *Frank Richardson Pierce* . 110
Stuffed . . . . . *Bert George* . . . 116

ONE ARTICLE

Lost Mines . . . . . *Roderick O'Hargan* . . 131
(Tin Bucket Mine)

MISCELLANEOUS

The Origin of Oil 20
Indians Have Radio 20
An Emerald Isle in Alaska . . . 26
A Volcano that Never Erupted . . 26
Trapper Keeps Winter Vigil . . . 70
The Alaskan Railroad Profits . . . 78
Arrowhead Found in Duck . . . 86
For a New Forest Policy 109
Let the Insects Do It 109
Ranchers Offer Terms to City . . . 115
Washington's Bad Fire Season . . . 130
A Beaver Farm 132
"Three-fingered Jim" of Stagecoach Days . 138
When the Sun Hides Himself . . . 141
Fliers are Bothered by Gophers . . 141

DEPARTMENTS

The Round-up . . . . *The Editor* . . . 133
The Hollow Tree . . . *Helen Rivers* . . 136
Where to Go and How to Get There *John North* . . . 139
Missing 142

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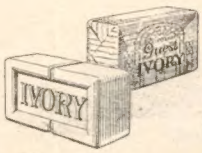

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The Shanty Sled

by Hulbert Footner

CHAPTER I.

AT BEAR COULEE.

IT was September at Bear Coulèe, and the poplar bluffs were painted with splashes of crude yellow ocher on the chocolate-colored hills. In the little hollows of the hills rose-scrub burned like fire. Every night for weeks past there had been a frost, and the weather showed signs of breaking; it would not be long before the first snow. "Old Woman" Rambert came to the door of her shack and looked up at the beautifully dying vegetation with an inexpressible pain in her eyes. It was like seeing one's dearest friend pass. She thought of the coming snow with a shudder. Six unbroken months of it to face! It was like the hand of death at her heart.

She shook her head like a terrier, and trotted back to her work. She had six loaves of bread in the oven, and that was only the first of several batches that had to be baked that day. Three of the boys were starting next morning on the four-hundred-mile journey outside. Throughout the whole country the men of Bear Coulèe bragged of their "old woman's homemade bread." A lot of good that did the baker, she thought with a wry smile. They were good fellows, all of them, but what did they know, what did they care about the sore heart of the lonely old woman who went to bed every night with a gnawing pain in her side, and got up with it.

She was only forty-eight years old, but for many a year now she had been the Old Woman. She ran the "kitchen" at Bear Coulèe; that is to say, she fed the gang, which consisted of Maccubbin, the trader, and the half dozen or so of farmers, all batchelors. There was a fiction current that she was putting by enough to retire presently, and live with her daughter outside. Only she and Maccubbin knew that that prospect yearly grew more remote.

She was an odd-looking little old woman with her scanty white hair screwed into a hard knot at the back of her head, and a bright red flannel dress. Year by year the style of it never changed. When she needed a new one she simply cut another piece from the bolt of red flannel which Maccubbin kept for her in the store. She had dark eyes full of a gloomy fire, and her mouth was surrounded by hundreds of tiny wrinkles, due to her continual pursing and twisting of it. In all her movements she was as quick as a squirrel.

Bear Coulèe was at the end of the wagon trail in that direction. Their nearest white neighbors were at Spirit River Crossing, one hundred miles south, Maccubbin was a "free" trader. The settlement at Bear Coulèe was his idea and his own making, and he enjoyed whatever profit there was in it. These particulars are related in order to explain the isolation of the place. In the most remote of "Company" posts there are at least the visits of the doctor, the inspector and the missionaries to look forward to. Maccubbin made no provision for missionaries. Hence there was no occasion for any white person ever to visit Bear Coulèe, and none ever did.

Hearing footsteps outside, the Old Woman drew a mask over her face. None of the men ever saw her without that mask; the mask of a gallant fighter who conceals his wounds. She was never the one to take refuge behind her sex. As she would have said, she always tried to keep her end up.

Maccubbin came in, a handsome, strong, dark man in the prime of life, with another sort of mask over his face. He was better dressed than you would expect to find a man in the backwoods; strathcona boots, whipcord breeches, tweed coat, and the inevitable stetson. This outfit was the insignia of his office; he was the boss.

"You want to see me?" he said.

"I sure do," she answered brusquely.

"What's the idea?" he asked, running up his eyebrows.

The Old Woman knew exactly why he had assumed this high and mighty air, and she was not in the least intimidated. "In the store the clerk is always about. I wanted to see you by yourself."

"What about?"

"You know perfectly well."

Maccubbin sat down, frowning still. The Old Woman gazed at him with that look of long-tried exasperation that women are so often obliged to bend on men. She was looking at his hat. In her twenty years in the country she had not been able to overcome her resentment over the fact that they did not take off their hats when they came into her kitchen. It hurt her in the beginning, and it was still hurting her—but she no longer spoke about it. She drew a long breath for patience, and began:

"The boys are starting out to-morrow, and I shall send my letter to my daughter by them. I want a draft from you to inclose in it."

"Oh, of course," said the trader, as if he had not known it all along. "I don't remember the exact figures, but there's a little over a hundred dollars due you."

"A hundred dollars nothing!" said the Old Woman energetically. "The child can't get through the winter on less than four hundred."

"That's not my fault," said Maccubbin.

"Nor mine either."

"Four hundred dollars!" cried Maccubbin with a cold, hard stare.

"That's what I said!" she returned, squarely meeting his cold eyes with her hot ones.

"That's ridiculous!"

The Old Woman waggled her head and pursed up her lips, and said nothing.

"You can't have it."

"Then I'll go out *with* the boys," she said promptly. "And you can cook for yourself."

"That's ridiculous too," he said coolly. "You know you can't go."

"And why can't I?"

"Because I won't allow it—in the first place."

This was what she was waiting for. "Are you the Lord himself?" she cried, brandishing her hands over her head. "Have you the power of life and death over us?"

"Don't be silly, old woman. You'll bring on a fit of coughing if you screech so. This is merely a matter of business, and you understand it as well as I do. You owe me over a thousand dollars. Out of consideration for you I have funded it, and I never say anything about it, as long as you pay me the trifle of interest yearly."

"Oh, you can always make the figures come out on your side."

"The team that takes the men out tomorrow is my team."

"Everything hereabouts is yours!"

"And I'm certainly not going to let my team carry my thousand dollars out of my reach."

"Then I'll walk!"

"A hundred miles?"

"I'd like to see anybody try to stop me!"

"Now come, Old Woman, you're just talking wildly. Suppose you did go out, what could you do at your age? You couldn't make a living for your daughter. You'd only starve together."

"I'm not making a living for her here."

"Quiet down, and talk to me like a reasonable being. You must remember that you're getting on, and your health isn't what it was. I stand to lose the whole amount. But I want to do all I can for you. I'll do what I've always done before, advance still a little more to you. I'll make it two hundred."

"Four hundred!"

And so the battle was joined. They went through this every year.

"If you were a square man," cried the Old Woman desperately, "you would take the responsibility of this boarding house and pay me a fair wage, but you make me stand the risk, and I always lose! Always lose! Because I have to buy everything from you!"

"It was your idea in the beginning."

"Because you persuaded me I could make money this way."

"I'll make it two fifty just to quiet you."

"Four hundred!"

"I'm not made of money. I've had a losing season."

"The Lord forgive you for that lie!" cried the Old Woman. *"You lose!* Look at these poor wretches of farmers here; all in your debt.—You take precious good care that they never get out. They have to buy everything they eat and everything they wear, and their seed, and their implements from you at your price, and when they're not frozen out and they get a crop, they have to sell their grain to you at your price. And the Indians, they're all in your debt too. You grind the grain into flour and sell it to them at your price; and they have to sell their furs to you at the price you set. Four profits on every transaction, and you dare to tell me you're losing money!"

Maccubbin's dark face turned darker still with rage, "Whilsht, Old Woman!"

he cried. "I'm not obliged to give you anything more than your hundred and eighteen dollars. And not even that, because you owe me a thousand! You'll do yourself no good by angering me!"

She marched up to him with arms akimbo. "And who are you that you must not be angered? You'll never shut my mouth while I have breath. You may break me, but you'll never tame me!"

Thus it raged for more than an hour. When Maccubbin strode out of the shack with knotted brows, he left a draft for three hundred dollars lying on the table. The Old Woman, her head still up, and her eyes flashing, bowed him out with polite sarcastic remarks, each of which had a sting in it. When he was gone she dropped into a chair exhausted, all but fainting, pressing her hand hard to her side. But there was thankfulness in the weary old eyes that she lifted to the yellow and brown hills. She had got more than she expected.

In the intervals of putting the bread in the oven, and looking to see how it was gettng on, and taking it out again, the old woman sat down at the table to write her letter to her daughter—her letters rather, for she always wrote two. The first, and the longest wrote itself, one might say: the pen fairly raced across the paper line after line without a pause, and the Old Woman's tears splashed down and spread the ink. When it was finished, she stood up and read it to herself in a low voice, holding a hand ready to press against her wrinkled lips when they trembled too much.

My Darlingest, Darlingest Child: I love you! Oh, how I love you! The thought of you is never absent from my heart! Those are my red-letter nights when I have a dream of you. The photographs you have sent me are my most precious possessions. I am never too tired to go over them one by one. The little ones are almost worn out. But it is the later ones that I love best. You have become such a beautiful woman that I can scarcely believe you were born of me. That sweet woman's face that I have never seen is engraved on my heart. Oh, I should know you among a thousand!

Two months have passed since I wrote you. I shall not speak of them. Nothing is changed here. It is a long nightmare. The land is beautiful in the summer, but I hate it, how I hate it! Because it has taken from me everything that I hold dear. It took my husband from me, and it forced me to put my child away from me. It has wrecked me, this land; I am not old, but I am done for, my darling. It has forced me to live among men, and long ago I lost my womanly gentleness. It has turned me into a hideous, coarse old hag. If the miracle should happen, and there ever was a chance of my seeing you, I should put it from me, though my heart broke in two. I could not bear to have you see me. You could not help but turn from such a one. It would be preposterous for *me* to set up to be your mother, my darling lady daughter. I would not risk losing your dear, dear letters which you write to the mother you have imagined.

But, oh, my darling! How I hunger and thirst for you; for a little love and tenderness and gentleness which have been denied me for twenty years! I continually forget myself and pray God to let me see you once before I die—that won't be long now. When I come to myself I fall on my knees and implore Him not to listen to my prayers, I am so terrified lest He put an intimation into your heart that I need you, and you should come here. That would be too terrible! You might be trapped here as I was. This country wrecks women, wrecks women, wrecks women! My last and final prayer will be that my child may never know what it is to be trapped in a womanless country.

The pain grows slowly worse. I don't know what it is. It doesn't matter. It is certainly a mortal pain; but slow. I can stand it if only I am able to keep going until I have set you on your feet, my darling. My great fear is of dying among these men. I must not think of that. If I am not taken too suddenly I shall have the courage to steal away before it happens to a place where they will never find me.

Good-by, my darling, my pretty one. May God and His angels guard you. Ah! My heart is breaking for you, my courage is gone. I just want you, want you, want you! Come to me, my child! Mother.

The Old Woman kissed her letter passionately, and going to the stove, lifted one of the lids, and dropped the

sheets on the flames. As the paper blazed up she whispered:

"That is my heart."

Then she brushed her hand across her eyes; shook her head like a terrier, and stiffening her little back, sat down to write her second letter with serious look, and pursed-up lips. This was a matter of much greater difficulty. The sentences came slowly. She had often to pause and bite her pen.

My Dearest Daughter: Mr. Maccubbin is sending out three lads to Miwasa Landing to bring in the three new teams that will be needed for next season's work, together with our winter's supply of grub, and that gives me an opportunity to write you for the last time this year. You may expect to hear from me again next April. That is, I will write in April, but it will be May before you receive it. But you can write to me again upon receipt of this, for the boys will be obliged to wait over at the Landing until the winter road forms. Horses can only be brought into this country over the ice. Address your letter to me in care of Hugh Bell, Miwasa Landing, Athabasca. Bell is the most dependable of the three. We expect them back here at Christmas or shortly after. For a Christmas present you may send me six pictures of yourself, all different. I like snapshots best; they are so unexpected.

One of the breeds will drive the lads to the crossing, where they will get a lift with the freighters over the long portage, and our team will come back. It will bring the August and September mail, and then I shall have two long, long letters from you I hope, and maybe a picture or two inclosed. It is silly for you to talk about sending me a little camera so I can take a picture of myself. Nobody here would know how to use it. You must just imagine what your mother looks like. You mustn't spend your money on any more books for me, either, for my eyes won't permit me to read by lamplight in the winter evenings. I must just defer my reading until I come outside, and can have my eyes seen to. That won't be long now.

I inclose Mr. Maccubbin's draft for three hundred dollars. I trust this will be enough to see you through, together with what you are now earning. I am delighted to hear how well you are getting on. When your work begins to appear in the magazines, you can send me the magazines, and how proud I shall be! This money I send is only a part of my earnings of course, and you must not stint yourself any necessaries. Should you run short through sickness or anything, write to me for more in the spring. I am saving every cent against the happy, happy day when I shall be able to leave here and join you. They say that the route which passes through Bear Coulèe has been decided on for the new transcontinental railway. That will make us all, well not rich, but comfortably off. I have a hundred and sixty acres of land right on the location. Of course it's mortgaged to Mr. Maccubbin for a small sum, but that will be a mere fraction of its value when the railway comes through.

You must never speak of coming up here. The expense would be terrific, and there would be nothing to see when you got here. I assure you it's the dullest hole on earth. Why, it's two months since I wrote you, and I cannot think of a bit of news. We had a crop this year, and the farmers are correspondingly elated, but most of it will go to pay the debts they contracted because of the freeze-up last year. When more farmers come in and a larger area is cultivated, we will not suffer so much from summer frosts. You ask me to tell you about the men, but they would not interest you, my dear; well-meaning fellows, but only rough, crude farmers. I am more fortunately placed than the farmers, because they all have to eat just the same, bad years and good.

My health continues to be excellent, I am happy to say. Everybody remarks on how well I look. I do not have to work as hard as you seem to think, for there is always native help, such as it is. I just direct things. You needn't fear the effect of the long winter on me. We do not have the extreme cold that they have to endure farther East, for the Chinook wind modifies our climate. In the middle of the winter I have seen the snow melt right off the prairie. The winter climate is dry and bracing, and seems to suit me very well.

That is all now, my dear. I have to see to the supper, and early to-morrow the lads will be gone with this. I will start another letter right away, and jot down a line or two from time to time. Sometimes in the winter we have to send men out to the crossing on snowshoes. Who knows perhaps you will hear from me before spring, after all. As soon as we have twenty people in this place, the government has promised us a regular mail service summer and winter. Good-by, my darling child. Take great care of yourself, and write me a long letter on receipt of this. Do not worry about me, for everything is going splendidly here. Much, much love from

Mother.

CHAPTER II.

SUPPER AT THE OLD WOMAN'S.

HUGH BELL and Billy Penrose sat on a bench outside the Old Woman's shack, waiting for the summons to supper. The sun had gone down and a chill was falling on the valley, but inside the shack it was a little *too* warm, for the Old Woman was in one of her "stews." When that happened, they all kept close to the ground.

What there was of Bear Coulèe was spread before their eyes. There was the old woman's shack, and a hundred yards away, Maccubbin's group of buildings: store, dwelling, mill and stables; two or three more shacks at intervals of a quarter mile or so down the little valley. That was all. All the buildings were of logs with sod roofs. Musquasepi or Bear Creek, a small stream, threaded its way down the valley to meander away to the northwest where it fell into a great river, they said. Nobody had been out there. The fields of golden stubble stretched along both sides of the creek.

"We'll have a fine day for the start," remarked Hugh.

It had cleared at sundown, and the sky was a lucent sea of aquamarine and topaz above the western hills. The surrounding hills were not hills really, but merely the escarpments of the prairie. On top it was bald and gently rolling for hundreds of miles in every direction. Bear Coulèe was a place where the deep trough cut by the little stream in the prairie had widened out to something less than a mile. The rich bottom lands of this hole in the prairie stretched along the stream for six miles.

"The richest land in the North!" Maccubbin would cry. "Twenty-four inches of black loam!"

Unfortunately the bottom lands were even more liable to frost than the bench above.

"What matter?" said Maccubbin. "The land is so rich that one crop out of three will pay you."

Well, to the involved farmers it didn't quite seem to work out that way.

The door to the shack opened, and the angry voice of the Old Woman came out with a burst.

"What do you s'pose started her off to-day?" asked Billy with an anxious glance through the window. Billy was the youngest member of the community, a stripling of seventeen with the rosy, innocent face of a child, and a man's length of limb.

"I suppose she's had a scrap with Maccubbin," said Hugh scowling. "It's a shame!" Hugh was some eight years Billy's senior, a big fellow; blond, slow, and diffident. The two batched together half a mile down the valley.

"What about?" asked Billy.

"What about? You know. She was trying to get money to send out to her daughter."

"Why does she stay here?" asked Billy.

"For the same reason that we're all chained here. She has a quarter section of land that her husband left her, and it's all she has in the world."

"It's a rotten shame!" said Billy.

"She and her husband were among the first to come in twenty years ago," Hugh went on. "I've heard say that she was above him in station. They had a baby just able to walk. The first spring after they came in, the man was killed by the fall of a spruce tree he was cutting. Seems they had put every cent they possessed into their outfit, and she didn't know what to do. Maccubbin persuaded her to stay, with his talk of the future of the country—you know his style. What he was after really, was a cook. He would have been glad to marry her then, but she wouldn't. She was one of these fierce widows; all other men were horrible to her alongside the memory of her husband.

But she sent the child outside to her sister by a missionary's wife from the crossing, and she stayed to cook. She's never seen her daughter since. She's still here cooking; you see what she's got out of it."

"It's a shame!" said Billy.

"So we don't mind if she gives us the rough side of her tongue occasionally," said Hugh. "I'd do anything to serve the Old Woman. Only she won't let me. Proud as Lucifer!"

The well-dressed Maccubbin presiding with dignity at the head of the table; the Old Woman in her red flannel dress at the foot; four men in more or less nondescript garments down each side: such was the entire white population of Bear Coulèe. There was a soft-footed, big-eyed, breed boy to fill the cups and bring the pie. All the men were in an excellent humor, for the meal was a special one in honor of the departing travelers; there was a haunch of moose meat with onions and potatoes, and a wild-cranberry pie. The Old Woman had quieted down. She kept her head up, and her mouth tightly pursed. She was Johnny-on-the-spot with her sharp remarks, but her glance was somber. There was always this emotional strain when anybody departed for the land of promise—outside.

"Bring me two whole cartons of cigarettes!" cried one. "I want to kill myself smokin'."

"Bring me a store suit with peg-top trousers."

"Aah! Peg tops went out ten years ago."

"Bring me a little phonograph and a dozen records. Oh, my Lord! That would make the winter nights pass."

"Bring the Old Woman a five-pound box of candy for me. None of your cheap stuff out of a wooden pail, but real outside candy in a box with a ribbon around it."

"Much obliged, Wilkie," said the Old Woman dryly, "but I'm thinking after a month on the trail, my old teeth would hardly be equal to it."

"Bring me in a Stilton cheese."

All this was mere comedy, of course. They knew they would get none of these things. Maccubbin might import them, and they could buy them at the store. It was the Old Woman who got in the slyest dig at the trader.

"Bring me in a mail-order catalogue."

There was a great laugh.

"Well, I hope there'll be room on the sleds for a little bacon and beans," said Maccubbin, undisturbed by it.

Maccubbin was the first to leave the party. He shook hands genially with Hugh, Billy, and Lester Morrow, the three travelers-to-be. "I shan't see you fellows before you start. You'll have to be off by five, if you want to spell at the water hole by the big spruce. Well, you know what you have to do. You'll find my outfit stored in my own warehouse at the Landing. Trudeau has the key; and Trudeau has the horses. Check up the inventory when you arrive, and again when you load the sleds.

"Start back as soon as you are able, but do not be foolhardy. Don't be the first party to start over the ice, but the second. Once you *are* started, push through without delay. You know as well as I do, that most years after January fifteenth, there is too much snow on the prairie for you to get through with horses and sleds. And we'll be in need here for sugar and beans and tea by that time."

When Maccubbin went a certain constraint was lifted from the gathering. The Old Woman sat down away from the table with her mending. She had a small lamp on a dresser beside her, with a tin reflector to cast down the light on her work. But her eyes were bad to-night. After an ineffectual struggle, she put down her sewing and sat quietly in her corner.

"Old Woman, have you written to your daughter?" asked Lester. He was a tall, handsome lad as dark and spare of frame as an Indian. And like an Indian's were his keen, close-set eyes. Unlike most Indians he was a great talker, and was generally the life of the party. He was reputed to be a favorite of Maccubbin's, but in the North a man finds his level, and there was a general feeling that Lester, good hunter and tireless on the trail though he was, was less dependable say, than the diffident Hugh.

"Why, of course," said the Old Woman.

"I'll carry it for you," said Lester.

"Much obliged," sad the Old Woman, "but I calculate giving it to Hugh."

Lester's eyes seemed to draw closer together. "Can't you trust me?" he said with the frank laugh which was one of his recommendations.

"Surely. But it just happened I spoke to Hugh about it first."

"Old Woman, did you give her our regards?" asked Wilkie Beach, a slack-looking, hairy farmer.

"Surely," she said, with more than a trace of dryness.

"Not meaning any disrespec'," said Wilkie deprecatingly, "but just because we feel we know her, having talked about her so much, and looked at her pitchers."

"Tell us about her, Old Woman," said Sandy Govans cajolingly. He was a wistful little fellow on whom Maccubbin's stock sizes of shirts and pants hung a world too big. "What's this about her being an artist?"

The old woman could not resist this. She said with a quickening eye: "She draws pictures such as those you see in the magazines."

"But I thought them was printed," said Sandy.

"You blooming idiot, they've got to be drawn before they can be printed," said Lester.

"Oh! Well, how was I to know? Well, anyhow, I never see no pitchers anywhere as purty as herself. Show us her pitchers to-night, Old Woman."

She got up with an air of great condescension, and, pulling open the top drawer of the dresser, took from it a little packet carefully wrapped in a handkerchief. The handkerchief opened, a little pile of photographs was revealed, including several of cabinet size, and many snapshots small and smaller.

"Let me see your hands," she said sternly to Sandy.

He wiped them furiously on a very grimy bandanna, before venturing to exhibit. The others, more or less furtively, also wiped their hands. The Old Woman, carryng the precious packet, returned to the foot of the table, and the men drew up again. With a sharp admonition to handle the pictures carefully if they ever wanted to see them again, she began to pass them around the board.

"This is the first picture they sent back to me after she had gone," she said. "Age two years, nine months and eleven days. At that time her hair curled all over her head as you can see, in ringlets as soft as the finest spun silk, and in color like pale sunlight. In this one they have put her hair in a ribbon for the first time. She is wearing a red-and-black plaidie. They sent me a sample of it. She was very proud of it, they said, and went about to everybody holding out the skirt and saying: 'See! See! New dress.'"

And so on, and so on. They all knew the Old Waman's tender, simple spiel off by heart. Nobody thought of laughing at her. They were not merely humoring her either; for this charming baby, child, girl, woman, had come to fill a big space in their empty lives. They handled the pictures reverently, and something of the mother's own rapt air entered into them as they looked. That is, into all but Lester. He was no

less keenly interested than the others, but he kept his slightly conceited air.

"Well, Old Woman, it is something to have had a beautiful child like that, even if it was by proxy sort of," said Wilkie Beach.

"Oh, the pretty little miss!" said Sandy with his face all softened. "See, in this one she looks as if she was just goin' to start dancin'. See! See!"

"She's somepin more than just a pretty child, too," said another. "See how she looks out at you so serious and all. She's got good sense."

"Hurry up with the ones where she's grown up," said Billy. "Those are the ones that get me. Oh, boy!"

Hugh said nothing at all, but his too-candid eyes betrayed him. Lester looked sideways at him with a slightly derisive smile. These two being young and of the same age, were great rivals in everything.

When at last they had all been passed around, and had returned to the Old Woman again, and she carried them to the dresser to put them in the handkerchief, something prompted her to count the pictures. Having done so, she whirled around to the table with a terrible face.

"There's one missing!" she cried.

They all looked slightly aghast, and started to look in the most unlikely places; under the dishes that remained on the table; under the table; under the chairs, they even got up to see if by chance they were sitting on the lost picture. It was not to be found. Meanwhile the Old Woman agitatedly went through the pile.

"It is the one taken on her nineteenth birthday," she cried accusingly. "A snapshot. She is sitting on the grass with a bush behind her, and her feet at one side. She has on a hat wth two wings, and she is smiling. Who had that last?"

Her tone made them all look guilty.

"I remember that pitcher," said Sandy hastily. "I looked at it, and passed it along to Dan here."

"And I passed it on to Wilkie," the next man hastened to aver.

"That's right, and I passed it to Hughey," said Wilkie.

Before Hugh could speak for himself, Lester, who sat on the other side of him, said softly: "It never came to me."

Everybody looked at Hugh.

"Bell, have you got my picture?" the Old Woman demanded in an awful voice.

The hanging head, the crimson face told their own tale. Hugh had never a word to say for himself.

"Hand it over!"

Hugh arose, and with wretched eyes, slipped his hand in his inside breast pocket and produced the missing card. He carried it to the Old Woman, with a hang-dog air. The feelings of the company were mixed. Lester led off with an enormous laugh, in which one or two others joined, but some, like little Sandy Govans, looked at him with a curious compunction. Billy, his pal, was of course quick with his look of sympathy, and he glared at the laughers. The Old Woman felt no compunctions.

"How dare you! How dare you!" she stormed. "You miserable thief! You snake in the grass! When I let you look at the pictures out of kindness, you would rob me, would you? Well, I'll take precious good care you never get your itching palms on them again. Out of my house, you thief, before I forget myself!" In her temper she forgot that she had asked Hugh to do her a service.

Hugh took his hat and left the shack without a word. Billy made haste to follow, with defiant backward glances at those who laughed. Outside the man walked along with his head down; the boy slipped his arm through that of his friend, but there was no answering

pressure; Hugh's arm hung straight down.

In their own shack Hugh sat on the edge of the bed and looked at the floor. Hugh and Billy shared a big home-made bedstead filled with straw. Lester's bedding roll was lying on the floor; for he was to sleep with them that night, that all might get up together.

"Aw, don't take it so hard," said Billy in distress. "It was only a kind of a joke like. The Old Woman don't mean all she says when she's mad."

"It wasn't a joke," muttered Hugh.

"Well, let on it was, anyhow."

"I was a fool—a fool! I thought she'd never miss it. There was another one almost the same."

"But what did you want it for?" asked Billy.

"I'm going to be away for three months," said Hugh very low. "I shall hear nothing, see nothing all that time."

The boy stared uncomprehendingly.

"Come here," said Hugh peremptorily. He let his hand fall heavily on the boy's shoulder. "You're only a kid," he said, "but you're a good partner. I want to tell you this, so you won't always be looking and wondering. There is no woman in my life. There never will be. How could there be with me stuck in a God-forsaken hole like this, and up to my neck in debt at that? Yet I'm young. I started to dream about this girl just to cheat myself, see? And it went on and on, and before I knew it it had *got* me. Yes, a girl I have never seen, and never will see. She is more real to me than life itself. Now, there never could be another woman for me, not if I was set in the midst of millions of them!"

"Oh, Hugh—oh, Hugh!" the boy murmured, half scared.

"Well, that's that," said Hugh, rousing himself. "I made a fool of myself, but I suppose it'll blow over. We won't speak about it again. Let's get to bed."

They left the lamp burning for Lester. When that lad entered the shack, a sharp look at the two on the bed showed him that they were asleep. However, in order to make sure, he went close to the bed. There was no move from Hugh or Billy. With every inhalation they were filling their lungs to the bottom. Hugh's coat was hanging from a hook on the wall at the foot of the bed. Lester stole to it, and, keeping his eyes fixed on the sleeping Hugh, he felt for the inside pocket. From it he drew a thin packet wrapped in newspaper. Within it was the Old Woman's letter. Lester took it out of its wrapping, studied the address upon it, rewrapped it, and returned it to the pocket. He then wrote down the address in his own notebook, and started to make ready for bed. He was thinking:

"I might write her a little letter myself. No harm in that."

CHAPTER III.

AT THE LANDING.

FOUR hundred miles from Bear Coulée—that is to say, across the prairie, over the long portage to the head of Caribou Lake, down the lake by boat, and down the "little" river and the "big" river to Miwasa Landing—the three travelers were now batching it in a shack of a more pretentious description, being built of rough pine boards, and roofed with tarred felt. The Landing was the first outpost of civilizaton, the place where one emerged from the wilderness; to men fresh from Bear Coulèe it might seem quite citified, with its piece of plank sidewalk, its company store with plate-glass windows, and its two-storied hotel that boasted both a piano and a billiard table. Hugh and Billy were satisfied; but Lester, thinking of the honest-to-goodness city and its delights, only one hundred miles farther to the south, chafed continually. They had

plenty of grub, and credit to a certain extent with Trudeau, but the canny Maccubbin had not provided them with any money.

The long journey had ended with relations a little strained among the trio. Nothing positive had happened, but there was a temperamental difference between Lester and the other two, and the closeness of the relations between Hugh and Billy emphasized it. The selfish, conceited Lester got a little on the nerves of his mates, and presumably they got on Lester's nerves also. At any rate when they reached the Landing, they flew apart. They had to sleep and eat together in Maccubbin's shack, but Hugh and Billy rarely saw Lester at other times. Lester shirked his part of the work of constructing the sleds for the return journey, but they didn't mind that, for they expected to have to wait five or six weeks for the ice, and they had little enough work to filll in the time.

From the Landing the various routes into the North radiated like fingers; consequently there was plenty of company coming and going. Hugh and Billy spent all their spare time at Trudeau's yarning with other travelers. Trudeau's was on the river front with a glorious prospect from the front platform over the Miwasa where it made its wide sweep in front of the settlement, and turned north again. But it was mostly too cold to sit outside now. They gathered around the big stove in the common room. After the empty months at Bear Coulèe how good it was!

"You want to keep your ears open, young Billy," said Hugh. "It's a sort of education for you. They're a rough lot, but they're real. Up North every tub stands on its own bottom. What a man knows, he has doped out for himself. Whereas in the cities, men are apt to be like newspapers, all printed alike."

Billy couldn't believe *all* he heard, because there was an incorrigible tendency among the men to josh the inexperienced stripling. He didn't mind so much, because they made it clear that he was a prime favorite with them notwithstanding. One of the men was Mel Delsher, a brawny Hercules with a black beard that overspread half his chest. He was a mail carrier with a route six hundred miles long. This was Mel's style:

"Waal, they say they ain't nothin' in nature but what has its proper uses, but I swear sometimes it's hard to see it. Take skeeters and black fly and muskegs. Or take sawr-grass. To the west of Great Deer lake there's thousands of miles of sawr-grass, I guess. 'Tain't fit to burn; 'tain't fitten for the lowest of God's critters to eat. I never could see no manner of use to sawr-grass except to tear the clo'es offen a man's back, when he was forced by the wind to make a landing on that side. But I learned better, boys. Even sawr-grass has its uses."

"What's that, Mel?" somebody asked.

"Waal, I'll tell you. One time in the spring of the year I was travelin' along the bench to the westward of the lake, when I saw far ahead, a curious procession like, wending its way toward the bottoms. Imagine my surprise when I come close to see that it was composed of mountain goats as far as I could see. You may well stare at me disbelievingly, men, but I said it and I stick to it. A whole procession of 'em; hundreds. And they didn't pay no more attention to me than if I wasn't there, but kep' straight on—the rarest and the shyest of all animiles. Strange ain't no word for that sight. They didn't pay no attention to me, because their minds were concentrated on somepin more important to them. Their glassy eyes was fixed on the distant sawr-grass."

The mail carrier paused to shave a plug of tobacco with great care not to

spill a shred, and Billy, all worked up, asked eagerly:

"What for, if they couldn't eat it?"

"They cut their whiskers with it, son," said Mel gravely.

A great roar of laughter went up, and Billy perceived that he had bitten again. He blushed, and wished that he might sink quietly through a hole in the floor. These fellows had such a dry manner you never could tell when they were preparng to sell you.

Lester never came home until very late; and since these days were not filled with strenuous labor, sleep did not come so promptly as usual to Hugh and Billy. They always spent an hour or so lying on their beds on the floor of the shack "talking," before they dropped off. They both cherished these talks more than they would have cared to admit. They had been friends for more than a year now, since Hugh had picked up Billy, a forlorn little derelict, at Spirit River Crossing; but Hugh, conscious of his superior years, had always treated the boy with a certain condescension. Their real intimacy dated from the night when Hugh had confessed his hopeless passion for a dream girl. Hugh had said they would never speak of that again, but of course they did. It eased Hugh's mind to speak of it. He could open his heart to the boy in a way that would have been impossible with a fellow his own age. As for Billy, well, he had always regarded Hugh as something between a god and a hero of romance. Nobody but Billy knew what was concealed beneath Hugh's quiet, slow exterior.

"She'll have her letter by now," Hugh said one night. "But she'll never know that I kept it warm inside my coat for three weeks. I wonder what the Old Woman has told her about me."

"Not much, likely," said Billy, "because the Old Woman rates her so high, you see. Alongside o' *her*, you and me are like dirt to the Old Woman."

"Yes, that's right," said Hugh. "It's natural. I hope to Heaven in her next letter the Old Woman won't say anything about me trying to pinch the photograph."

"Well, I don't know," said Billy. "If she did, it might start the girl wondering about you. Women are shrewd that way."

"That's just childishness," said Hugh. "We've got to face the facts."

"Well, you're a fine-looking man," said Billy, "and she's a woman."

"Cut it out!" said Hugh peremptorily. "I don't like it!"

Billy mumbled something to himself obstinately.

Hugh presently went on dreamily: "Measuring by distance it isn't so much, but measuring by time, we've come close to her. Two days by stage from here to Prince George; and four days by train from Prince George to New York. Less than a week would do it."

"Don't think of that," urged Billy.

"I like to think of it. I'd like to go to New York just because she's there, even if I didn't see her."

"Do you mean to say you'd go to New York without trying to see her?"

"Sure. I don't want to see her. That is, I know it wouldn't do me any good. That would start something that I—that I couldn't handle. That would *do* for me, kid. But as it is, I got things straightened out in my mind. I can think about her——"

"You're too humble minded," said Billy. "After all, a man's a man."

"Stuff and nonsense," said Hugh. "Face the facts!"

One night toward the end of October, when they returned to the shack, Lester's bed roll was gone.

"Oh well, he's found a bunk house more to his taste," said Hugh. "He'll turn up for grub."

But at breakfast there was no sign of him. Sallying out afterward they met Mel Delsher, with whom it was a

point of pride to know everything that went on.

"Seen Lester?" asked Hugh.

"Why, sure," said Mel, "didn't you know? He started out for town at sunup with 'Chocolate' Jimmy in his demmycrat. There's style for you!"

Hugh merely shrugged. When they were alone, Billy asked anxiously: "Hadn't we ought to do something? The two of us can't take in three teams."

"He'll be back," said Hugh.

Lester had not been content to sit gossiping away the lazy hours at Trudeau's. After having been immured for a year at Bear Coulèe, he felt as if he was full of coiled springs, and he told himself he had a right to have some fun while he was outside. So he went prowling about the settlement to look for it. There were other less reputable places of entertainment at the Landing, such as Pete Bridge's retired shack a piece down the river bank, where they played seven-up for high stakes, and rattled the bone cubes. Here Lester made his hang-out—but he had no money! That fact was ever present in his galled breast. He could only look on at the play, and Pete Bridges, he thought, looked at him sourly when he came in. A young man in his pride, and no money to fling away! Lester found it unbearable.

Providence threw Chocolate Jimmy Beeston in his way. Chocolate Jimmy was quite a character in the country. With his meager frame encased in a "much-bepocketed" hunting suit, and his wrinkled face with big, credulous eyes, he looked like a middle-aged little boy. He was not of the country, but termed himself "explorer." He had gone in several times armed with an elaborate and impracticable outfit, but had never got very far from the Company posts. Altogether he was quite a joke among the old-timers. It was rumored that he wrote books about his travels, but nobody had any proof of it. He had gained his sobriquet from the amount of chocolate he packed.

Chocolate Jimmy came up the river from Fort McMaster in a canoe with two native paddlers, and he had to wait over at the Landing for a few days for his conveyance to town. He disdained the ordinary stage, and he had sent for old Dave Gregg, a Scotch half-breed to come for him in a democrat. This made a lot of talk. Chocolate Jimmy was hailed with cheers by the crowd at Trudeau's, but he fancied that there was a lack of respectful sympathy in their greetings. He was leary of the crowd. He and Lester had come together like the magnet and the steel, for Chocolate Jimmy had money, and Lester had plenty of sympathy for a traveler with money.

They hobnobbed in Chocolate Jimmy's room. The explorer opened bottles of rare old Scotch, and recounted his exploits. Respectful sympathy caused the little man to gobble like a turkey when he talked, and wag his head like a walking beam.

"Yes, sir," he said, "the enraged she-grizzly was squarely between me and the setting sun, and I was dazzled. There was not a second to be lost. I dropped to one knee, and with a bowing motion, threw the tail of my coat right over my head to keep the sun out of my eyes. The bear looked surprised at this maneuver. I let her have it between the eyes, and she dropped. Somersaulting two or three times under the force of her impetus, she fell dead at my feet."

"Gosh! That showed presence of mind!" said Lester with a perfectly straight face.

"Nothing at all! Nothing at all!" said Chocolate Jimmy with a wave of his hand. "One has to learn to think quickly, the sort of life I lead."

Finally Old Dave arrived in the

democrat. He brought one of his boys along for company on the way up, but even so, this left a vacant space in the four-seated rig. Lester thought about it longingly, and redoubled his attentions to Chocolate Jimmy. He let fall several little hints about having a bit of business to do in Prince George, and after several drinks of the generous Scotch, Chocolate Jimmy asked him to come along. Lester fetched his bed, and lay beside old Dave that night to be ready for an early start.

And so they went. On the way down, Lester confided to his host, with that frank and engaging laugh of his, that he was stony broke; consequently Chocolate Jimmy had him on his hands. Willingly or unwillingly he paid Lester's score in Prince George, but on the third day he departed for the East in a drawing-room compartment, and as he had not suggested paying Lester's way back to the Landing, the young man was left flat. He went to Maccubbin's agent in Prince George, and, identifying himself, said that he had an errand to do for his boss in town, and had run a little short. He got a small advance, and used it to prolong his stay in town, trusting to his luck to send him another windfall.

One night he went into the bar of the Athabasca Hotel where he had scraped acquaintance with a bartender. His friend seeing him, turned to a party of gentlemen at the bar, and said:

"Here's a lad what knows hosses."

One of the gentlemen turned around and looked at Lester from his head to his feet. Lester knew him at a glance for one of "these real tony sports;" he had a look of command in his eyes that inspired Lester with respect, though Lester could have picked him up with one hand and dropped him over the bar.

"What's your job?" he asked.

"I farm at Bear Coulèe in the Spirit River country, five hundred miles northwest," said Lester.

"Five hundred miles!" said the gentleman with a laugh. "That's a goodish way to come for a drink."

"I came down to take in new teams and an outfit for the trader up there," said Lester.

"Teams, eh? Then you know horses?"

"I was raised with them."

"How'd you like a trip to New York?"

New York! The heart seemed to puff up in Lester's breast. But he answered cautiously: "I don't know; I got to go back home."

"New York's only a four-day trip. You could be back here in eight or ten days."

"Well, I could spare ten days or two weeks to it," said Lester carelessly. "We're waiting for the ice. What's the idea?"

"I've got a string of polo ponies that I'm shipping to a gentleman on Long Island. They're loaded in a car on the siding here. I've got one man with them, but my second groom has gone on a tear and left me flat. Do you want it?"

"What is there in it?"

"All expenses, your transportation back to Prince George, and twenty-five dollars."

"I couldn't see much of New York on twenty-five."

"I can get plenty who would do it for the trip alone."

"Make it fifty, and I'm your man."

"Can you give me a reference?"

"Sure. There's my boss's agent here." Lester named him.

"All right. It's a go!"

Lester left the place treading on air. New York! New York! New York! The words were singing through his mind. What a chance; *what* a chance! Lucky he put down that girl's address. He'd show her a time in New York. What would Hugh say when he heard about it!

CHAPTER IV.

IN NEW YORK.

IN a bare, workmanlike studio on West Eighth Street, two girls clad in smocks well spotted and streaked with paint, were hard at work at their easels. The one in the faded green smock was a very pretty girl with a mop of light brown hair, and the deep blue eyes that are generally called violet. She was working at a picture that looked as if it might be intended for a magazine cover. The figure had been completed from the model, and she was painting in the background. Her friend in the rusty black smock was somewhat older, and not at all pretty; a sharp-nosed, dark little thing; but she looked intelligent. She was painting a bunch of chrysanthemums in a Chinese jar in a bold, free style that signified a considerable talent. Both were deeply absorbed in their work, and apparently oblivious of each other.

After a while the dark-haired girl put down her brushes for a breather, and looked around at her pretty friend. She saw that her friend likewise had stopped work, and had averted her head from her picture with rather a discontented expression.

"What's the matter, Selina?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing in particular," was the answer. "I just feel dull."

"What! And only yesterday a magazine offered you a story to illustrate! All day you were capering around here like a wild thing."

"I suppose this is the reaction setting in."

"Why should it? It's just as fine a thing to-day to earn your living as it was yesterday."

"Oh yes, I know."

"What's the matter then?"

"I was just wondering if that was all there is in life."

"Mercy! If what is all?"

"Work."

"Suppose you were a salesgirl or a stenographer. We're lucky."

"I'm not kicking against my work. I'm crazy about it. But I'd like a little fun, too."

"Sure! We all would. What do you mean by fun?"

"Well—fun."

"But everybody has their own kind, my child. Do you mean fellows hanging around, and going out to dinner and dances and so on?"

"Yes!" said the pretty Selina with a defiant look.

"Well, you don't have to glare at me."

"I thought you would think I was foolish."

"Sure, you're foolish. But who isn't? I would enjoy that kind of fun first rate myself. But I made up my mind long ago that it wasn't for me."

"Ah, you have real talent, Clara. I have not—though I can support myself."

"It's a good thing I have something," said Clara dryly. "If you want that sort of fun, why don't you have it? I know at least three men who would fall all over themselves to take you around, if you so much as raised a pretty eyebrow in their direction."

"Artists," said Selina, making a little face.

"Well, what's the matter with artists?"

"Oh, I like artists as artists, but not as men." She struggled to explain herself. "Artists are too knowing, too sophisticated. They treat us like men, and talk shop all the time. How could romance ever creep in? Besides, they generally despise us, because they consider themselves better artists than we are—even the worst artists do. Oh, no! Decidedly I must keep the two things separate. I must look outside my business for a man."

"There's sense in what you say, kid."

"Anyhow, city men don't appeal to

me," Selina went on. "I wish I knew a man, simple, strong, and direct in his nature."

"That's the ideal of all of us," said Clara. She turned around from her easel. "Let's talk about men. The fascinating creatures!"

Selina smiled quickly at her friend's droll manner. When she smiled one saw that she was more than pretty; she was beautiful. "I don't know anything about them," she said. "I was brought up by an unmarried aunt, a grandmother, and a great-aunt, and there was no man around our house. As you know, my father died when I was a baby. My mother, who had gone up into Northern Athabasca with him to make a home, sent me out to her relatives to be taken care of. Living with three women, two of whom had never married, I got the notion that men were worthless creatures, who were much better left to their own devices.

"I never knew any young men until I came down to New York to study art. At the Art Students' League I had plenty of opportunities to meet them. But I had no time. I felt that my people had all made great sacrifices to enable me to obtain an art education, and I must not lose a day in learning to earn my own living. So it was grind, grind, grind. Now that I have turned the corner, I feel that I have missed something. I'm nearly twenty-three."

"And youth has fled!" said Clara.

"Oh, go on! Seriously, Clara, there is a horrible weakness, a vice in my nature that you do not suspect. I long to be a butterfly. I want to be courted. I crave to be admired."

"Well, if that is sinful," said Clara, "there won't be many women in heaven."

"But the trouble is, that the men I know don't seem to be worth attracting. Such featherweights!"

On another day when Selina and Clara had stopped work for lunch, there came a knock at the studio door. The two girls paused in the act of biting into sardine sandwiches, and looked at each other inquiringly; nobody was expected.

"Come in!" Clara sang out.

But no one came in. They heard some one cough in an embarrassed manner behind the door, and the knock was repeated. Clara, with her quick, birdlike walk, hastened to open the door, and Selina looked with curiosity to see who was behind it. But it was dark in that end of the room, and she could see only a tall dim figure. She heard a resonant voice say:

"Oh! I was looking for Miss Selina Rambert."

"Well, she lives here," said Clara.

A young man strode into the room. Selina caught her breath in astonishment, for he was like a figure of romance—like a character that she might have drawn from a magazine story. To be sure he was wearing an ordinary store suit which clung rather awkwardly to his tall figure, but his shirt was of blue flannel, and the hat he carried in his hand was a broad-brimmed, high-crowned affair such as is seldom seen in the streets of New York. It was the hat which provided the touch of romance. Then, too, Selina saw that he was wearing boots, though his trousers came down over the tops. He walked somewhat stiffly in them.

He was uncommonly good looking, with the sleek black hair of an Indian, and an Indian's piercing gaze. He was very tall, with broad shoulders and a waist like a girl's. He bore himself like one accustomed to the saddle. There was a sort of pantherlike grace in his movements, of which he was well aware. What a figure to stray into West Eighth Street! At present he had rather an embarrassed air, due to the strangeness of his surroundings. His eye darted sidelong glances at the studio appurtenances.

Selina was standing in the full rays of the skylight, and as soon as he saw her he broke into a wide, engaging smile that revealed dazzling teeth. "There you are!" he said. "I'd have known you anywhere!"

Selina opened her eyes wide. "But I don't know you!"

"Of course you don't!" he said with a delightful laugh. His embarrassment was only superficial. Selina perceived a man's boldness and assurance in the bright black eyes. Well, she did not like him any the worse for that. "I'm Lester Morrow," he said.

The name suggested nothing to Selina. "I'm sure I never saw you before," she said. "How is it that you know me?"

"From the photographs that you sent the Old Woman."

Selina still looked blank.

"That's the name we fellows have for Mrs. Rambert, your mother."

"Oh!" said Selina. She was a little affronted. "She isn't so very old."

"Sure she isn't!" said Lester. "It's just in the way of affection, see? Oh, we think a heap of the Old Woman! She's the only white woman about."

"Well, sit down," said Selina.

Of the two, Selina was the more embarrassed now. Clara had seated herself quietly in the chair before her easel, and was watching them both.

"What a beautiful pair!" she was thinking. As they paid no attention to her, she began to sketch Lester on a piece of bristol board.

"Did my mother send you to me?" asked Selina.

"No," said Lester. "She didn't know I was coming to New York. I didn't know it myself," he added with his laugh. "I didn't expect to come any further than the Landing to get horses for Maccubbin."

"Yes, my mother said in her letter that three of you were coming out; but she only mentioned one name, Hugh Bell."

"Oh, Hugh, yes," said Lester carelessly. "He's up there. I went down to Prince George while we were waiting for the ice," he went on with a casual air, "and I happened to meet a friend who asked me to oblige him by bringing a string of polo ponies to New York. So here I am."

So far so good. But at this point the conversation suddenly broke down. Neither could think of anything more to say. Clara watched them with the hint of a smile clinging around the corners of her lips.

Lester was not to be downed for long. "This is a strange life to me," he said, glancing around the studio.

"Well—and you are strange to us," said Selina.

They looked at each other, and Lester suddenly broke into his frank, boyish laugh. Selina had to join in it. That broke the ice.

Clara spoke up. "We were just finishing our lunch. It isn't much—just what two women would pick at. But if you'll join us——"

"Thanks ever so much," said Lester, "but I was going to ask Miss Rambert——" and he hesitated, betraying a boyish confusion that was very attractive. "Of course I don't know the rules and regulations here in the East. But I thought maybe since I'd come so far—and knowing her mother and all—I thought maybe she'd come out to lunch with me."

Selina glanced at Clara, who kept her head down and made believe not to get it. There was an obstinate dimple in Clara's cheek.

"Why, surely!" said Selina with a touch of defiance. "I'd be delighted to. Half a moment while I tidy up."

The back part of the studio had a curtain hanging across it. Behind the curtain was the girls' dressing room. Selina disappeared.

Lester glanced at Clara cautiously. He was a little afraid of her.

"I don't bite," said Clara in her sharp way.

Lester laughed, but it had rather a forced sound. This girl was too sharp. "Can I look at your work?" he asked politely. "It's wonderful to me how you are able to paint pictures."

Clara held up the little sketch she had been making.

"Why, that's *me!*" said Lester amazed. "Gosh! Can she do that too?" he asked with a jerk of his head toward the curtain.

"Surely," said Clara.

"But not as well as she can," said Selina from behind the curtain.

"Oh, but she's been at it much longer," said Lester quickly.

Clara bent over her work again with a dry smile.

When Selina reappeared in her pretty dress and smart little hat, Lester was sharply taken aback. "Gosh!" he exclaimed. "Gosh!"

"What's the matter?" asked Clara wickedly.

"In her working clothes I thought she was out o' sight!" said Lester. "But I wasn't prepared for this. A photograph doesn't tell you anything. She's wonderful—wonderful! It's enough to strike a man dumb."

Selina blushed and made believe to be having difficulty with her glove.

"You seem to have all your powers of speech," said Clara dryly.

"Come on," said Selina.

When the door closed behind them Clara sighed, and tossing the sketch aside, got down to serious work.

Pagliariello's, an old Italian restaurant, was only a few doors from the studio, and within a few minutes, Selina and Lester were seated one on each side of a tiny table, overlooking the animated panorama of Eighth Street.

"Can you eat another meal?" asked Lester anxiously.

"Oh yes," said Selina frankly. "We only eat enough at lunch to keep ourselves going, so we can work afterward."

They were well pleased with each other. Lester showed his pleasure, and Selina hid hers. Each saw in the other the incarnation of a secret dream. Lester looked across the place. There wasn't a girl there that could hold a candle to this girl. Amid great laughter Lester struggled with the national dish of Italy.

"You mustn't cut it," said Selina. "It's never done."

"Then I ought to have a funnel to lead it in,' said Lester.

Between courses he leaned his elbows on the table and gazed at her ardently. "You don't know what this means to me," he said. "Try to imagine it. There isnt' a white girl within four hundred miles of Bear Coulèe. When I come out, most any white girl looks good to me. Just as girls, you understand. But you—you are *the* girl to me. From looking at your photographs so much I have put the image of you away inside me. I never expected to see you face to face. It's like a miracle. It's almost too much. It makes me light-headed."

"Well, if you feel like that," she said, laughing a little uncertainly, "I wish you'd keep it to yourself. It puts me out of countenance."

But it was music to the girl's ears, and he knew it. He didn't stop. "It comes right out of me," he said pleadingly. "I can't help it. You must excuse me. Those photographs of you," he went on, "I know them all by heart from the ones with the ringlets and the plaid dress on."

"Fancy that!" murmured Selina.

"And the Old Woman has told me so much about you. That's why I feel as if I knew you so well."

"Does she show them to the others, too?"

"Oh, well, maybe once in a while,"

said Lester carelessly. "But the Old Woman and I are special pals. She wouldn't tell the others everything."

"Fancy, having your photographs make friends for you like that with people you will never see!"

"Look, I'll only be here a couple of days or so," said Lester, leaning closer, "before I have to go back and bury myself. Come out with me often, will you? Spend all the time with me. You don't have to work."

"I'll come as often as I can," said Selina demurely. "And you must come to the studio."

"Your friend don't like me," said Lester.

"You can't tell. She's like that to everybody."

After they had finished their meal, Selina said: "We must stop talking about ourselves now. I want you to tell me about my mother."

"What can I tell you that you don't know from her letters?" said Lester.

"I know next to nothing," said Selina, "because she will not write about herself. Her letters are all about me. She says that there's nothing at Bear Coulèe to write about."

"She's right enough there," said Lester. "It's a dull hole. And she has a rotten time, it's natural she wouldn't want to talk about it."

Selina looked up quickly. "A rotten time? What do you mean by that?"

"Don't you know?"

"I told you I knew nothing."

Lester would have been glad then if he had not spoken, but there was no help for it now. He could not foresee the result of his speaking. "It's Maccubbin," he said. "He's a sort of Czar of Bear Coulèe. He hasn't got anything on me," he lied, "because I don't owe him anything; I stand on my own feet. But he's got all the others sewed up with debts."

"My mother too?"

"Sure. She's the worst off of any. Because Maccubbin needs her so bad, see? He likes to eat nice. So he's fixed it so she's got deeper and deeper in his debt every year, and now she can't ever get away."

"The man must be a monster!" cried Selina.

"Oh no," said Lster simply. "He's a hard man, but square."

"I thought the business paid," said Selina. "My mother has sent me money every year."

"I know that," said Lester. "Every year she has a stand-up fight to get it out of the old man. It's quite a joke with the boys."

"Oh, heavens!" murmured Selina. "Is there no way she can get out?"

"No way but by Maccubbin's teams. *He* isn't going to carry her."

"How much does she owe him?"

"Oh, nobody but the Old Woman and Maccubbin knows that."

Selina plied him with one searching question after another. Lester, bored, but wishing to be agreeable, answered as best he could, and truthfully—except where he was concerned in the story.

"It's told a lot on the Old Woman the past year," he said thoughtlessly. "She has fallen away to almost nothing."

Selina quickly lowered her eyes at that, and for a while said nothing. When her voice came, it was a mere whisper. "Anything special the matter?"

"Who knows?" said Lester. "There isn't any doctor."

Something new came suddenly into Selina's face. Lester, enamored of its beauty, failed to mark it. "When are you going back?" she asked.

Lester silently calculated his money. "In three days," he said.

"And you will be pushing right through to Bear Coulèe?"

"I expect so."

Selina caught her breath. Her eyes seemed to have grown almost black in

their remoteness. "I am going with you," she said quietly.

Lester looked at her clownishly. All his assurance was gone at a stroke. At first his vanity suggested that the girl was throwing herself at his head; but a glance in her face dissipated that idea. She was not thinking of him at all. Then a swift panorama of the winter journey passed through his mind, and he was staggered.

"But—but you couldn't!" he stammered. "It's four hundred miles from the Landing. A month's journey maybe—driving on a sled without shelter through the snowstorms and the zero weather. It would kill you! You couldn't stand it."

"If a man can do it, I can," said Selina. "I've *got* to do it!"

One by one she calmly overruled every objection that he brought up. "It doesn't matter. I'm going. Thank Heaven I didn't have to spend the money my mother sent me. That will be more than enough for expenses."

The thought of the sweetness of the long, long journey with her stole into Lester's mind, and his blood began to race. "Oh, well," he thought with an inward shrug, "if she's determined to go, it isn't *my* funeral." He leaned toward her across the table.

"Oh, it will be great, *great* to have you," he murmured ardently.

But Selina's glance was far away.

To be continued in next week's issue of WESTERN STORY MAGAZINE.

THE ORIGIN OF OIL

ACCORDING to John H. McFarlane, formerly professor of botany at the University of Pennsylvania, without fishes the world would have no petroleum. He finds his starting point in the appearance of fossils of entire fish, scales, spines, and teeth in oil-producing rocks known as shales. He builds an edifice from other known facts and concludes that the fish was the original oil well. Of course the fish go back into prehistoric times—millions of years ago. But find shales of fossilized fish remains and you invariably find oil.

INDIANS HAVE RADIO

ALONG the coast of British Columbia are several small reservations set aside by the Canadian government for the Siwash Indians. The Indians along this coast are the wealthiest inhabitants in this section of the country. Nine months out of the year they work in lumber camps, trap for fur, et cetera. During the other three months they have their own way of making money. They fish for salmon which are taken by the canneries in the vicinity.

Sockeye salmon in these waters run about even in size and weight, each fish being about sixteen to twenty inches long and sufficient to fill three or four full-size cans. They are among the best fish for canning purposes, and the companies pay at the rate of thirty-five cents per fish. It is said that in the course of two hours many of these Indians often make as much as twelve dollars per man. As a consequence the Siwash along the coast of British Columbia sleeps in a brass bed and listens nightly on his radio to the news and music of the country.

The Hiding Place

By

Hugh F. Grinstead

Author of "Unfenced," etc.

HIDDEN from view in a rocky cove high up on the side of a deep cañon, two men lounged in the shade of the rocks late in the afternoon and carried on a desultory conversation in low tones. Two or three yards away lay a third man, apparently wrapped in deep slumber. The sleeper was an Indian, short of stature, and very dark even for one of that race. The manner of wearing his hair, and his meager garb of hand-woven cloth were proof that he belonged to one of the Pueblo tribes, a Hopi of the arid mesas.

Of the white men one was roughly dressed, and puffed away at his cigarette with careless abandon. His companion, taller and older, was nervously impatient as he shifted uncomfortably about on the bare rocks, turning his glance every few minutes in the direction of the sleeping Indian.

"Looks like it was time he was coming out of that—ten hours without so much as a wiggle of his toe!" the tall man exclaimed with an impatient gesture toward the Indian. "Don't suppose you dosed him too heavy, do you?"

The younger man tossed away the remaining stub of his cigarette and spat at a crack in the rock before he replied with languid deliberation: "Reckon you ain't ever been drunk on mescal, Prendergast, or you wouldn't expect a feller that's been soaked good to come alive much under a whole day an' night. An' a Injun that's wore hisself out at a snake dance is goin' to take on a consid'able jag when it's offered to him free gratis for nothin'. You wanted me to bring this hombre along quietlike, without stirrin' up any disturbance, an' I figgered the best way to do it was to fill him with mescal, which I done without no big trouble."

"I'm not complaining about your method of getting him, Potter," the man called Prendergast by his companion replied, "but it looks as if you might have overdone the job. To be worth anything to us this Indian has got to be able to walk—and talk pretty soon. We are likely to have the whole tribe down on us if we hang around here too long."

"Ain't no danger of them rustlin' out to hunt one missin' Injun under two-three days, an' he'll be soberin' up before night so's he can walk. I ain't pretendin' to know how to make a Injun talk; I reckon it can't be did."

"I know how to make him talk all right—enough to tell us how to find what we're looking for," Prendergast replied, his thin lips drawing still thinner across his teeth in a cruel smile.

"Reckon you might cut an Injun's arm off an' still he wouldn't tell unless he was a mind to."

"Cutting off an arm would be mild torture compared with what I could give him."

"Anyways, I ain't got any too much faith in makin' him lead us to a place where we c'n scoop up a fortune in a minute that's been layin' there two-three hundred years."

"I'm still willing to give you the hundred dollars cash to stay with me until the finish if you'd rather have that than take a chance on half the loot," Prendergast offered eagerly.

"No, I'd rather gamble on the big thing, even if I lose. A hundred dollars ain't goin' to last long, an' if they's a quart of pearls an' rubies an' the like in that hide-up you figger on us findin', half will be a plenty to keep me till I get too old to have a good time; but just the same, it stands to reason that some other white man would have done that before now if it could be did."

"Lots of them have tried, but they didn't go about it right," Prendergast countered. "You see, there is only one family in the whole tribe knows the secret that has been passed down from father to son through a dozen generations. They wouldn't touch a one of these stones for fear of the curse said to go with the contact, but they keep on guarding the hiding place until such time as the curse is removed. Now all this stuff about an Indian suffering all kinds of torture rather than reveal a tribal secret is pure bunk. Just let me put him through the third degree magnified about ten times, and he'll be glad to lead us to the place where these precious stones are hidden. From what I can learn after a long study of the subject, the hiding place is not many miles from here, and I am absolutely sure we've got the right Indian."

"How come they got so many precious stones hid away? I ain't never see anything but turquoises amongst these Hopis."

"Supposed to be the crown jewels of some ancient Aztec prince from Mexico, who was killed in a battle with the Spaniards. Whatever it is that is to remove the curse from them hasn't happened yet. When it does, this old Hopi's family will be rich."

"If somebody else don't beat 'em to it!"

"Yes, and if we don't make a slip from now on we ought to be the lucky ones."

"I'm plumb willin'. What good'll it do a Hopi Injun, anyway? He don't know how to spend money, an' it ain't nothin' but right this should be put in circulation by some white man, 'stead of lettin' it lay there a thousand years."

"That's my view of it."

"If torturin' this old Hopi makes him come across, I'm in for tryin' it. Wouldn't be no partic'lar loss if we should bump him off," Potter declared.

"Last thing we want to do, though—a dead Indian wouldn't do us any good."

"Just as you say, you're runnin' that part of the job," Potter agreed. "Me, I figger if I can spill Hopi lingo so's this old Injun won't make no mistake about what we'll do to him if he don't come across with news of this hidin' place, I'll be keepin' up my end of the bargain."

"That's right. You did a good job when you got him off here so quietly, and now if you can interpret what I say to him so he won't have any doubts about my being in earnest, we'll call it even and split fifty-fifty on what we get."

Thus Felix Prendergast, eager to add a few thousands to the little fortune he

had already amassed through divers questionable projects, and Jeff Potter, with visions of wealth without labor, had devised the diabolical scheme of torturing the old Hopi into revealing the secret hiding place supposed to hold the ancient treasure.

The two renegades became suddenly silent as the old Indian stirred, turned over, and finally sat up, blinking dazedly at the white men.

"Ugh, mescal!" he muttered.

Potter held a canteen to the old Hopi's lips, jerking it away before he could take more than one good swallow.

"Been too much trouble gettin' the old cuss awake to let him have enough to get drunk again. A drink or two to sober him up quick, an' we'll be ready to move," said Potter.

Revived by the draft of fiery liquor, the old Indian glanced quickly about him, his beady eyes sweeping the opposite wall of the cañon and finally resting inquiringly upon the two white men.

"Looks like he is sober enough to understand now; tell him what he is up against," Prendergast suggested.

Speaking in the old Indian's native tongue, Potter laid before him the reason for his presence in this isolated spot. No word or gesture was spared to make the recital impressive. With gruffly spoken threats and grimaces meant to strike terror to the heart of his victim, Potter strove to drive home the argument for a quick response to his demand that the Indian lead them without delay to the ancient hiding place of his people, where reposed the treasure.

Through it all the old Hopi remained impassive. Not by so much as the movement of a muscle of his wrinkled face or the lighting of his dark eyes did he betray the faintest emotion. From outward appearances it was as if he understood no word the white man had spoken. It was when Potter had ceased that the Indian stood up, and, extending his arms, brought his palms together in front of him.

"A curse be upon any who would touch the precious gems of the Hopi," he said with calm emphasis.

"Tell him we are not afraid of the hoodoo; we'll take chances on the anger of his guarding spirits," Prendergast replied when Potter had rendered the old Indian's statement in English.

"The Great Spirit has clouded the eyes of the Hopi so that he sees not the way to the secret place. So it will remain until the curse be removed," was the old Hopi's reply.

"Tell him he's an old liar; that we know how to remove the cloud from his eyes!" Prendergast exclaimed impatiently when Potter had interpreted the reply.

In spite of the threats of his captors, the old Hopi drew himself up proudly and refused to utter a word or take a step toward divulging the secret of the hidden gems. He no longer denied nor did he admit that he knew of the place.

"No use to waste any more time talking to him," Prendergast announced as he got up. Scrambling down the bank a little way, he returned after a few minutes with a dead cedar larger than his arm, tough and sound.

"A trick I learned from an old Chinese pirate," he explained. "Worse torture than scorching the soles of the feet. He'll be glad to talk when he gets a good taste of it, or I miss my guess. Let's tie him up first."

The old Hopi offered no resistance while the two white men bound his hands and tied his legs together at the ankles. At the direction of Prendergast, he was laid across the edge of a big rock and one end of the cedar pole was thrust between his bound thighs. If the Indian guessed their purpose, he gave no sign.

Again at the direction of the older

man, Potter sat on the helpless Indian while his companion bore down with slowly increasing weight upon the end of the pole. A little pressure would bring pain; increased sufficiently, it would drag the thigh bones from their sockets. No man could endure such torture.

For a moment the Hopi remained silent, then a muffled scream rose to his lips. Prendergast eased the pressure slightly at that, then again threw his weight on the slender pole. Even the brutal Potter objected weakly to this second administration of torture to the all but speechless Indian.

"Better give him plenty while we are at it, then he won't be likely to forget how it feels and make another dose necessary," Prendergast insisted.

So intense was the pain that the Indian was nigh to fainting, a gurgling gasp coming from his lips as Prendergast eased the pressure on the pole.

"He'll talk now."

Trembling and unnerved, the Hopi was unbound and lifted to his feet. When threatened with a repetition of the torture he had just undergone, he shuddered and hastily replied:

"I will lead you to the place of the hidden jewels, but the curse of the Hopi god, it is——"

"Never mind about that, you can't scare us off," Potter interrupted him. "But mind you, don't play any tricks, or we'll give you more of the same medicine."

"We start with the coming of darkness," Prendergast presently announced. "How far is it, Hopi?" he asked through the interpreter.

"But half of the night," the Indian replied.

They began preparations for the start, eating of the cooked food they brought, giving the Indian a portion of it.

"An' I seen that old Hopi dancin' in the *kiva* with a snake in his mouth—a live rattlesnake," Potter mused incredulously. "He's got a heap more nerve than I have to hold a live, bitin' rattler in his mouth, but he give in to that torture quick—pretty nigh too quick for an Injun."

"The best and nerviest of them will give in when you put that thigh-bone torture to them," Prendergast responded. "But we'll have to watch the old savage, may have to try it on him again if he shows signs of double crossing."

The expression brought to the eyes of the old Indian by the torturing pain had given way to relief and resignation. Had the white men been looking at him while they talked, they might have detected a malignant gleam of hatred and a curling of the old lips that would have passed for a smile—not a smile that was pleasant to see, however.

When the sun sank below the western rim of the mesa, the men started. The old Hopi, his hands bound securely, walked between the others. For an hour they traveled at the bottom of the cañon. They left it by way of a short side cañon, crossed a ridge, and entered a wide basin where huge rocks reared themselves from the barren floor. When they had traversed this basin they entered another cañon and followed up its tortuous bottom until it ended in a circular cove inclosed by high walls of jagged rock. The moon had risen, and the weird light added to the appearance of utter desolation about them.

"We wait here for the coming of the sun," the Hopi calmly announced.

It was now after midnight, and the two men decided to take turns at guarding their captive, so that each of them might get a little sleep before the coming of daylight. The old Indian lay upon the bare ground and slept without fear.

With the coming of dawn the men were astir. They gathered such bits of

dry fuel as they could find, and built a fire over which they made coffee in a can they had brought with them. They shared the food and drink with the Indian.

By way of a reminder, Prendergast pointed suggestively toward a slender sapling that might be hacked down with a heavy knife. The Indian signified his understanding, but there was no fear in his eyes.

"He'll be good," Prendergast observed with confidence.

He failed to see the gleam of triumph that lurked for an instant in the savage eyes, quickly masked by the rigid expression of unconcern.

"Likely looking place to hide anything," Prendergast observed. "I couldn't have picked a better myself, tucked away in here among the rocks where nobody ever comes. Luck seems to be with us so far."

"Uh-huh, an' the old Hopi seems plumb satisfied to show us the place," Potter returned. "Somehow I'm afeard of the old cuss, though. Anybody that can carry a live rattler in his mouth without gettin' bit, ain't all human."

"You're superstitious; I believe you take stock in that tale about the curse of the Hopi gods."

"No, it's just a hunch I got that that old mummy face is laughin' at us."

"Let him laugh, that's all he can do. I'm more anxious than ever to get my hands on the stones."

"Reckon I won't let you back me out from fingerin' my half of 'em."

The sun was shining dazzlingly bright on the face of the high rocky wall when they reached the top of the smooth slope and took to a ledge but a few feet in width. When they had followed this for a little way they passed under an overhanging rock, beneath which was a shallow open cave ending in an irregular fissure. The floor of the cave was uneven, a huge boulder barring the way near the back.

The Indian stopped here, and, pointing a bony finger toward the boulder, said: "Here lies the secret hiding place of the Hopi. If the white man would anger the spirits, let him roll back the big rock and look upon that which he seeks. Rather than bring the curse upon my people, I will endure death and torture first."

"It's big talk you're makin', old-timer, but you can't scare us off," Potter declared as he stepped toward the boulder, closely followed by his companion. "Stand where we can see you, though, till we find out if you've lied."

The old Hopi folded his arms on his breast and stood at the entrance while the two men went toward the big rock. They put their shoulders against it and heaved. It moved a few inches, and they let it rock back to gain momentum. At the third trial it started. The two men set their feet against the rocky floor under them and pushed until the big rock toppled and rolled back.

They had but a momentary vision of the black hole where the rock had lain. like a keystone binding together the flat rocks that formed the floor upon which they stood; for at that moment the section of floor beneath them tipped like a trapdoor, and they shot downward.

They fell little more than ten feet, alighting upon something that rattled and crumbled—a mass of human bones. Given time, they could easily have climbed out. Armed as they were, they could have defended themselves against a visible foe.

But they had barely touched the bottom of the dark, narrow pit when an angry buzzing greeted their ears and a sickening odor filled the air. Potter screamed with terror when he felt the needle prick of a rattler's fang in his arm, while Prendergast cursed and fought against the darting heads of half a dozen venomous reptiles he could not see.

There are those who will tell you that

an Indian never laughs; but it was something like a weird chuckle that came from the lips of the old Hopi as he heard the last evidence of struggle from the bottom of the dark crevice in the rock.

Perhaps when another came to invade the sacredness of the Hopi hiding place, there would be other bones—dry and crumbling—for the intruder to fall upon. The old Hopi knew this, only too well.

AN EMERALD ISLE IN ALASKA

KODIAK in the Katmai district of Alaska occupies a situation in the Pacific similar to that of Ireland in the Atlantic Ocean and may rightly be called an emerald isle. Although it is one hundred miles from Mount Katmai, a volcanic explosion of Katmai in June, 1912, buried Kodiak nearly a foot deep in ashes. The gray blanket of ashes transformed the green Kodiak of other days into a gray desert of sand, but after a period of two years the ash-laden hillsides were again covered with verdure as fine and green as any Irish shamrock.

"Never was such grass known before, so high or so early," said a resident of Kodiak. "No one ever believed the country could grow so many berries, nor so large, before the ash."

Kodiak owes its climate to the tropical ocean current which washes its shores. The eastern half of the island is occupied by a forest of spruce whose trees reach a great size. Then comes luxuriant grass land equal to any grazing land in the United States. It is equaled only by the "guinea grass" of the tropics. Of the berries, the most important is the salmon or Molina berry, which is allied to our blackberry, but has something of the taste of the raspberry. There are also high-bush blue berries which are famous for their flavor. Shelikof Strait, at Kodiak, is a treacherous bit of water.

A VOLCANO THAT NEVER ERUPTED

AN incipient volcano which never became a live volcano is found in the Apishapa region of Colorado. This district of Colorado is part of the semiarid plains and mesas which lie at the east foot of the Rocky Mountains near Pueblo. The rocks at the surface are soft shales and thin limestones which give rise to flat-topped mesas and bad lands. In the center of the area thick sandstones rise in a low dome, into which Apishapa and Huerfano Rivers and their tributaries have cut deep, vertical-walled cañons. Small vertical dikes of ancient lava cut these rocks at many places and point toward the towering Spanish Peaks, to the southwest, once a center of volcanic activity.

In the sharp dome in the midst of the nearly flat strata of the area some of the lower rocks of the region are exposed, and it is believed that this doming of the strata was caused by an injection of lava beneath rocks now exposed, which if it could have burst through this cover, would have formed a volcano. Not far distant in the great plains are similar domes which have been eroded deeply enough to expose the intrusive lava. These volcanoes which never reached the eruptive stage are common enough in many portions of the West.

Blackie's Last Stand

By

Max Brand

Author of "The Black Rider," etc.

CHAPTER I.

BLACKIE IS UP AGAINST IT.

HE looked like a rat, and he was a rat. He had a yellow skin and a smoky black eye with yellowish pupils. His clothes were "snappy," with a Broadway cut, and the material was cheap enough to make a tailor see a profit. He wore dirty gray spats over shoes of scratched calf. He carried a stick and wore his hat rather far back on his head and pushed rakishly to the side. Perpetually he was fumbling for a cigarette and finding it, and holding the match which he lighted until the flame seemed about to sear his fingers. Then he ignited the tobacco and snapped the match contemptuously away.

Such was Lew Bender as he arrived in Jackson Corners, and every man and every child in Jackson Corners knew at a glance that this fellow was "bad medicine" with a vengeance. He looked, as Si Jenkins said afterward, like equal parts of rat and snake.

And Si was right.

This was the man who asked where he could find Lewis Jason Connell. He asked it of Dan Harper, of the Circle Y Bar. And Dan spat in the dust before he answered.

"I dunno that I ever heard of a bird by that name. Say it over again, will you?"

"Lewis Jason Connell——"

"Connell? Andy Connell lives out on the road, but Lewis Jason? Why the devil, man, I have it now. You mean 'Blackie!'"

"I've never heard him called that," said Lew Bender. "Maybe he packs that moniker in these parts."

"Sure," said Dan Harper. "He don't pack no other. Might you be a friend of his—from back East?"

"Maybe I am," said Lew.

"I seen Blackie around the corner; I guess that you'll find him there now."

Lew Bender was glad to pass from under the searching, disagreeable eye of the stranger; he turned the corner and there his eye fell at once upon none other than Blackie himself, reining a spirited horse and holding another horse by the bridle until presently a girl ran out from the post office and sprang into the saddle on the led horse.

Then: "Are you sure that you can't come, Lewis?"

"I'm sorry that I can't."

"You'll come over soon, though?"

"Of course, if I may."

"Good-by, Lewis."

"Good-by, Beatrice. Remember me to Mr. Greenough."

She whirled away down the street on her horse; and Lewis Jason Connell, turning in the opposite direction, found himself almost on top of Mr. Bender.

The latter leaned against a hitching rack, his feet crossed, one jaunty hand resting on his hip, and his broad, disagreeable smile was turned up toward the young horseman. As for Blackie, his start was so violent in the saddle that his fiery horse reared and danced. Blackie controlled him with a cruel, strong hand.

"What brought *you* here?" he gasped out at the other. He added, without waiting for an answer: "Didn't you get my last letter?"

"Was there a check in that letter?" snapped out Lew Bender.

"I explained in the letter——" began Blackie heavily, and growing paler every moment.

"Was there a check in that letter?"

"No, but——"

"Then the letter wasn't worth waiting for. And I came back here to get some action out of you, young feller!"

Two or three people, in passing, eyed the stranger curiously.

"Let's get out of this," suggested Blackie. "I'll meet you at the end of this lane——"

He twitched his horse around and galloped to the end of the cross lane. There was only one main street in Jackson Corners, and the town was so narrow and long, that a hundred yards from the pavement of the main street one could be out in the open again. Under a broad old oak tree, Blackie dismounted.

If he made a dashing figure on horseback, he was yet more notable on foot. For then one could see the careful workmanship which had been lavished upon the making of this youth. He stood, to a fraction of an inch, at exactly that romantic height which, it has been agreed, is neither too tall nor too short for a man. He was six feet tall in his stockinged feet. His face was such as one might expect to find, here and there, among the people of south Italy, dark, olive-skinned, and almost too handsome and smoothly perfect for the face of a man. He was twenty-one years old. There was more fire in his eye than in the eye of the young stallion he rode. No girl in the world could have looked into his face and felt his eye upon her without a leap of the heart.

However, Mr. Bender came toward this brilliant figure with a baleful expression and a sneering lip. He said, as he drew closer:

"Too good to be seen talkin' to me in the street, Connell?"

"Why should we stand out in the sun when there's shade here?" answered Blackie, but he flushed a little. "Now tell me what's wrong. What brought you here, Bender?"

"Take it easy," said Bender. And he sat down on a stump and removed his hat, so exposing a small head covered with hair which was well slicked and brilliant with vaseline. "Who was the swell dame?"

"A friend of mine," said Blackie vaguely. "What I want to know——"

"I said," remarked Bender, raising his voice harshly, "Who is the swell dame?"

Blackie bit his lip and flushed. "She is Beatrice Greenough," said he.

"The devil she is!" murmured Bender.

"Do you know her?" asked Blackie anxiously. "Do you know who she is?"

"Sure I do. I've looked up the people around this burg. Her old man is the bird with all the spare millions. You ain't making a dead set at the Greenough dough, are you?"

"Certainly not," said Blackie.

"Certainly not!" mimicked Bender.

"The devil, kid, lose it, will you? I know you, and I know your kind. Cut out the bunk and talk straight to me, will you? It might do you some good!"

Blackie said not a word.

"Comin' back to the other thing," said Bender, "I want to know about the dough that you owe me."

"I explained in my letter," began Blackie nervously.

"Darn the letter. Lemme hear you speak your piece now."

"Bender, I—I've struck rather on a rock——"

"You have, have you? A rock?" snarled out Bender.

"What I mean to say is—a temporary difficulty——"

"The devil, kid, talk out! You can't get the coin to pay me?"

"Bender, I'm frightfully sorry, but I can't! If you'll only give me time to turn around——"

"What's the matter with Connell himself? I've looked him up. He's got money to burn. What would two thousand be to him?"

"Two thousand!" exclaimed Blackie.

"Sure," said Bender smoothly. "It was fifteen hundred. When you wanted that money, I looked you up and made pretty sure that your old man had plenty of money to stand behind that. But I got to have the price of my ticket out and back and money for my time, too. That'll bring the fifteen hundred up to two thousand flat!"

"It's not fair!" groaned Blackie. "Now that I'm down, you're taking advantage of me!"

"I say, why can't you get two thousand out of the old boy. Is he a tightwad?"

"Bender, I'll tell you the truth: He gives me this allowance. He thinks that it's a big allowance. He looks back to the value that money had when he was my age. He doesn't see that times have changed. But if I asked him for more——"

"Well?"

"He's a Tartar! He'd laugh in my face! Besides, how could I explain why I need the money?"

"He's a Tartar, is he?" sneered Bender. "Well, kid, I can be a Tartar, too! A darned red hot one! And if you can't explain how you come to owe me that money, I'll do the explaining myself! And when he finds that you been playing the ponies——"

"Wait a moment," broke in Blackie. "Do you mean that you'd do that?"

"Don't I? I do!"

A yellow glint of danger came in the eyes of Blackie, and he looked so steadily upon the tout that the latter leaped suddenly to his feet and turned white.

"Look out, kid!" he gasped out. "Don't do nothing foolish that you'll hang for!"

The hand of Blackie dropped away from his hip. "I wish to Heaven that I'd never seen you!" he groaned.

"Well," said Lew Bender, "there's another way out. Suppose that you go to this friend of yours—this rich Greenough! Suppose that you go to him and tell him that you're in a hole. Wouldn't he kick through with the dough?

"No, no!" shouted Blackie. "Man, he detests gambling. I'd be ruined with him. It would be better to go to Connell!"

Lew Bender sat down on the stump again. "That was what I wanted to get at," grinned he. "You and the girl are pretty thick, eh? Thick enough to get your hopes up?"

But Blackie merely bit his lip again.

"It has to be your old man, then? It's him that I have to talk to?"

"Listen to me," said Blackie, in desperation. "If you talk to Andy Connell, I'm done for. You understand that I'm only an adopted son?"

"Is that right?"

"It is. He'd pay the money, I suppose, but he'd put me down for a worth-

less dog. And he'd cut me off without a penny. That's his way!"

"A hard old bird, eh?"

"He's all of that."

"Look here, Connell, I ain't such a bad guy. I've been in the hole myself, and I know what it's like. Well, kid, I'll give you a chance to turn around. I'll give you till to-morrow morning. But if I don't get the coin by that time, I go to Connell and spill the beans. Y'understand?"

CHAPTER II.

THE WHITEST FELLOW IN THE WORLD.

ALL the joy was gone from the heart of Blackie as he rode away from that oak tree and took the trail homeward. In a swirl before him he saw a thousand dark possibilities. If the race-track tout reached the ear of Connell with the tale, Blackie was ruined forever, beyond a doubt. He would be so completely cut off that he would no longer be able to hold up his head and play the part of the gentleman, and therefore he would be unable to continue that courtship of Beatrice Greenough which, it seemed to him, opened golden possibilities for the future; possibilities far more golden than even the complete inheritance of the Connell fortune, even should that fortune turn out to be greater than Blackie suspected it might be.

His whole future, therefore, rested upon his ability to raise that sum of two thousand dollars—a paltry sum compared with his expectations! But to whom could he turn for it? Some money lender might give him that amount at a frightful rate of usury. But there were no money lenders near Jackson Corners—none of those gamblers in futurities. And he had only until to-morrow morning! Who else could he turn to? He looked over the list of possible friends. But, indeed, what real friends had he? There were the Greenoughs, attached to him in the first place by a bit of sham in which he had taken certain credit which really belonged entirely to "Red"—there were the Greenoughs, but if he went to Chalmer Greenough with such a story as this which he would be forced to tell, he well knew what the answer of the millionaire would be. Doubtless he would give the coin, but doubtless he would despise Blackie forever after. Even this, however, was better than to allow the tale to come to the ear of hard-headed, hard-hearted Andy Connell.

A bitter choice, at the best! But there were no other real friends to whom he could turn. There were scores of acquaintances, to be sure. There were many people whom he could meet pleasantly. But there were among all those acquaintances not one man or woman whom he could take into his heart and to whom he could tell his troubles.

On whom could he lean? He could think of only a single person, and that was his somber rival, his bitterest and oldest rival—Red Hardwick!

Many a year, now, the chiefest emotion in his life had been his hatred of Red. And yet, time and again, Red Hardwick, out of strange largeness of the heart which Blackie could not really comprehend, had come to his assistance. Still they remained what they had always been—rivals in everything! It was in vain that Blackie had secured for himself the legal position of son to Andy Connell. The heart of the old miner, he well knew, was still as ever linked in affection to Red. And now, as a final touch, Red was beginning to show a great interest in Beatrice Greenough. He had watched them at the last dance in the village; Red danced badly enough, and he talked little enough. But Blackie could see that he was happy with the girl. And so was the girl happy with Red. Partly, no doubt, because of

the stories of Red's football prowess in college. Though, for that matter, were there not far more brilliant stories to be told about Blackie, himself, on the gridiron? But, above all, she had been flattered because Red, who never paid the slightest attention to any girl, had at last come to her feet among the rest of her admirers.

Blackie, thinking the matter over, wondered at the lightness of the minds of these women.

However, it was still possible that Red might do something for him. It was a weakness of Red's. He did not know how to say "no," and Blackie despised him for the very folly of the thing.

He found Red in the big new corral behind the Connell house taming a five-year-old mare which Joe Hooker had caught and given to him. She had run wild until this year and become as tough and as hardy as a mustang. Now she was a creature all fire and danger. Red had found an odd name for her, but it never seemed trite when one had the mare in sight, with her trembling, dilating nostrils, and her glittering eyes, and her wild beauty, and her ears twitching back and forth.

Spitfire they called her. Joe Hooker himself sat on the top bar of the fence and gave directions while Red worked. It seemed to Blackie a ridiculous and rather contemptible thing that an educated young fellow, such as Red, should submit himself to the direction of a rough cow-puncher like Joe Hooker. But there was Joe, using a specially caustic tongue on this day.

"Ease up the rope to her head—is that easing up the rope? I didn't say yank her head off—I said ease up to her. Give her some slack, now, and start all over ag'in. You got a gentle hand like an Indian! Here you been working five days and making her worse every day. Steady, Red. Now go at her again. Not so fast; not so fast! The devil, kid; work like you had a thousand years to do it in; not five minutes. If you want to *break* her, go ahead with the rough stuff. But if you want to *tame* her, treat her like she was a lady, and a lady she'll be!"

Blackie could endure no more. He had an overwhelming desire to repay the puncher with some of the edge of his own tongue, but he restrained the impulse because he knew that it would anger Red more than it would the cow-puncher. Besides, if the latter were really irritated, he had a ready and a deadly gun.

So Blackie merely stepped into view around the corner of the barn and watched Red going inch by inch toward the head of the frightened, shaking mare.

"Red!" he called. "I want to talk to you!"

"Can't you wait, Blackie?"

"It's important."

"So is Spitfire."

"I tell you, I mean it, Red."

"All right, then. Say, Joe, will you try your hand with this fool mare while I talk to Blackie?"

"If you figger she's a fool," said Joe Hooker coldly, "I'll take her back and get you another hoss with more—sense!"

"No, no, Joe. I wouldn't trade her for a dozen of those whip-trained brutes."

"Then do the training yourself. It ain't your hoss unless you've trained it yourself. Y'understand? It ain't your book unless you've wrote all the words in it."

"All right," sighed Red, submission itself. "I'll come back and try you a little later, Spitfire!"

He came to Blackie, red-faced from his labors in the sun. The dust had mingled with the perspiration and streaked his face with mud.

With every year he had grown more and more unlike Blackie—stockier—

wider of shoulder, shorter—with long, dangling arms and the blunt jaw of the natural fighter. Now his blue eyes twinkled at Blackie.

"What's up, Blackie?"

"Red, I'm ruined!"

"The devil!"

"I'm flat, Red."

He had made up his mind that no lie would serve his purpose as well as the truth.

"Flat? Is it really bad, Blackie?"

"Worse than you could imagine."

"What can *I* do?" said Red, without too much friendliness in his tone.

"First give me your word that what I say to you stops with you."

"Of course."

"I'll take your hand on that, Red."

"You're a suspicious devil!" said Red, and gave his hand carelessly enough.

Here Blackie breathed more freely, for he knew that the pledged word of Red was more binding than an oath sworn on the Bible by another man.

"Now let's have the story."

"Red, last year in school I knew a chap from the South who used to make some money by playing the ponies——"

"I see. You tried the same thing and were trimmed. Is that it, old-timer?"

"Trimmed pretty deep."

"Well, how much?"

"Two thousand bones!"

Here Red whistled by way of comment. "That's the devil, Blackie."

"And now the rat that got the money out of me in the first place has come on to Jackson Corners and he swears that unless I get the money to him by to-morrow morning, he'll blow the whole news to dad!"

"D'you mean it? It would finish you with him, all right. He'd cut you off like a mangy dog—that's how he hates gambling!"

"And you'd have the whole deal left to yourself, Red. It's hard to ask you to stand by me, when you stand to win everything and lose nothing——"

The thought made the face of Red flame. He dropped an impulsive hand upon the shoulder of Blackie.

"Darn it, Blackie, I'd never stand by and see you sink like that. But what can I do? Two thousand looks like a lot of money to me."

"Haven't you saved anything? The old man is a lot more generous with you than he is with me."

"I know that he is. Yes. I've got about seven hundred salted away. You can have that, of course. But that's only a starter."

"And I can't finish the collection, Red. There isn't a friend I could borrow from except Greenbough, and he——"

"Oh, I understand. You couldn't do that—not if you were starving. Wait a minute, Blackie. I may have some friends who'll corral some coin for me. I could try them, anyway."

"Heaven bless you, Red, if you could do that!"

"I'll do my best with them. But I don't know—I'll take a whirl at them as soon as I can get a saddle on a horse."

"Red, you're the whitest fellow in the world!"

"Bunk!" grinned Red, touched by this praise, and whirled away to get a horse. Blackie sighed with vast relief, and then he smiled. After all, a fool like Red deserved to enjoy nothing but the fruits of folly and labor for others all the days of his life.

CHAPTER III.

THE MONEY IS RAISED.

WHEN Blackie went back to the house, Red pondered the matter carefully. His problem was quite different from that of Blackie. For whereas Blackie had a thousand acquaintances and no real friends, no real

enemies, Red had a thousand enemies and perhaps some score or two of friends who were bound to him, it might be said, with bonds stronger than steel. Among those friends he could go as he would and ask what he chose to ask. But there was this great trouble. Most of them were poor men—as poor, say, as common cow-punchers and laborers are apt to be. For the best companions of Red Hardwick were not among the upper classes even of that rough community. The men he loved, lived by their hands.

He went back slowly to Joe Hooker, who was still sitting on the fence, supporting his lean face between his hands and staring at Spitfire. She, rejoicing in her freedom from the hand and the rope of man, was gamboling like a mad thing through the little corral and raising a dense cloud of dust.

"Ain't it a shame?" remarked Joe Hooker.

"Ain't what a shame?" said Red, falling sympathetically into the same vein of grammar.

"Look there at Spitfire. Don't she look like she was floating on a bubble of air? And here I've caught her and dragged her in where she's gunna be a slave instead of running free, out yonder—ain't it a shame, Red?"

"I don't know that I've ever thought about it," said Red.

At this, the cow-puncher turned his head and looked with a sort of sad reflectiveness upon his youthful friend.

"Look here, Red," he said, "with all the studyin' that you been doin' back East in that school, how much thinkin' *have* you done?"

At this Red, without a trace of pride or secretiveness, rubbed his chin and frowned as he summed up the total.

"Not a darn bit," said Red. "We get some books shoved at us, Joe. We grind through them. We memorize a bit. We get so we know what the professors want us to answer. They give us passing grades, and that's about all there is to it! The only thinking I've done in college, I guess, was out on the football field."

"Why, Red, you might as well have been out here wrastlin' with steers and bulldoggin' the yearlin's."

"I might as well," admitted Red with perfect simplicity, so that Joe Hooker grinned broadly upon him.

"Darned if you ain't an honest man, Red," said Joe. "And that's why some of us love you and some of us hate you. Well, kid, no matter what happens, you'll come out on top. Honesty wins!"

"Are you on top?" asked Red. "And ain't you honest?"

At this, Joe Hooker scowled toward the distant horizon. "Well," said he, "I guess that's thinkin' a jump ahead of me, at that. Besides, maybe I been honest, but I been mighty foolish, too. I've done my talkin' with bullets. And the last word that'll be said to me will be with bullets, too! Now what's ailin' you, Red?"

"I'm busted," admitted Red. "I'm flat, and I haven't the nerve to go to Andy Connell for any more dough."

"Why not?"

"He's old-fashioned about money, you know. And what I need is too much. He'd figure out that I'd been throwing my life away. I need thirteen hundred dollars, Joe."

"Is that askin' me for it?" said Joe.

"It is, old son."

Joe Hooker grinned. "You'd take me for an ornery maverick that didn't have a cent in the world, I guess?" suggested he. "Well, kid, I can pony over eight hundred cold simoleons right pronto."

"Good heavens, Joe. How've you managed to save eight hundred dollars?"

"Don't ask me no questions," said Joe grimly. "I got the money for you in my breeches pocket. And here it is. You don't need to count it. Take my word that it's eight hundred dollars."

He drew out a bill fold and handed it to Red. The latter had flushed a little.

"This is taking a pile from you, Joe."

"Not half as much as I wish it was. Mind you, I ain't askin' how you come to run into that much debt—a kid your age—but I wouldn't mind knowing!"

"From being a fool," said Red. "I'll tell you the story some other day. Now I'm figuring who I can hit next."

"Your next best friend," said Joe.

Who was the next best friend of Red Hardwick, prospective heir to the largest part of the Connell millions? Red found him in Jackson Corners with the hind hoof of a work horse hooked up between his legs and resting upon his leather apron. The thick odor of burned hoof hung in the place, and little blue pools of smoke were gathered among the shadows of the upper corners; and broad streaks of sunlight broke through the generous cracks in the walls of the smithy, cleaving through the mist in the old shed.

"Hello!" said Red.

"Oh, darn your heart!" said the smith.

"How's things, Si?" asked Red.

"Now, blast you!" concluded the smith, and drove the last nail home, and rasped off the outside of the last hoof.

"I never seen such a way as the Cameron boys keep their hosses," said the smith by way of greeting. "Darned if they don't come in here without a tatter of a shoe on any foot of their hosses. One hoss'll have his hoofs wore to the red. Another has 'em all growed out of shape, and I got to carve away like I was makin' a darn statue before I can find the foot to put the shoe on. Sit down, Red; and tell me what's what. Have you been boxing to-day?"

"No," said Red.

"That's bad," sighed Si Jenkins. "When I was your age, I was working every day and working hard. It's *every* day's work that counts the most. And you need it—how you need it! That left of yours ain't no more straighter than the back of an old woman. You got a right cross like a greaser swatting flies. Oh, Red, you need a lot of training! When I was your age—why, you couldn't of put a glove on me. I would of stayed away out of the smash of that all-fire shift of yours—Lord knows where you found that punch! And I'd of pecked you to pieces with long distance jabs!"

"Maybe you would," said Red.

"Don't be so modest," said Jenkins, "when you know that I'm lying! What's the matter? Have you come to ask me for a favor that you act so dog-gone polite?"

"That's the long and short of it, Si."

At this, the blacksmith sat up a little from the box of nails which he had chosen as a chair. He drew forth a handkerchief and with it mopped away the soot from the fore part of his face, so that he looked oddly like a man peering through a hole in the fence. It was a face not beautiful in the beginning, and beaten frightfully out of shape by many bitter battles in the prize ring of another day.

"Well, well," said he more gently, "what could I be doing for you outside of teaching you how to hold up your mitts, kid? What could a sooty old fellow like me do for Connell's smart kid?"

There was irony in the words, but nothing other than the tenderest love in the voice. The Westerner is strangely diffident in the expression of any emotion, and most of all he scorns and derides professions of fondness, man to man. He speaks in the softest tones and musters his most polite language for the foeman he has determined to kill if he can. He treats the man with whom he is about to fight to the death with more diffidence than he treats the woman he loves.

And Red answered: "You can do for me what Andy Connell would sweat a lot in doing. I need five hundred dollars. Joe Hooker handed me eight hundred a while ago. Can you hand me any part of the rest?"

"Five hundred simoleons," said Si Jenkins. "Ten thousand beers," he translated. "Well, kid, that's a lot of money for a gent like me to lay hands on. But I've laid away some coin. The old woman has it."

"You can't ask it from her, Si. Not for me."

"Can't I?" said Si calmly, the dangerous calm of one whom nothing can stop. "Oh, but I can, though! You wait here!"

He rose and left the shop and when he was gone, Red made a wry face. It hurt him more than he could have put into words to make these requests of his friends, and to make them for one whom he detested in his heart of hearts —Blackie. He felt, too, that it was a great weakness, deserving of no commendation. For of all the people in the world, Blackie was the only one of whom he would have unreservedly said that the man was evil. So far as he knew, the only virtue in Blackie was courage, and he knew Blackie as no one else could hope to know him.

Presently Si Jenkins came back with a harried look which told how high the voices must have been raised in the house before he was able to extract the needed coin from his wife. But he counted into the hand of the youngster five hundred dollars in wrinkled bills.

"There you are, Red," said he.

"You'll get interest for this," said Red, greatly moved.

"I'll get the devil!" declared Si Jenkins with warmth. "The interest I want is to see you practice with the gloves every day. Oh, Red," he went on, stepping back again and eying the deep chest and the sinewy arms of the boy, "when I think of what you might do in the ring if you was to give your mind to it, it makes me sad. Darned if it don't! But here you are with the makings of a middleweight champion in you, and here you are tied up to a bunch of money that old Connell is sure to give you. I say it's a sad thing, Red!"

"You never can tell," murmured Red. "I might come to it, Si. And if I do, you'll be my manager, eh?"

"Kid," said the blacksmith solemnly, "I'd make you champeen inside of a year. That's all! How's the footwork?"

"I'm jumping rope."

"That's right. It'll keep you shifty and light on your toes. The best way to break the weight of the other bird's wallop is to be light on your feet. When he hits you, he thinks that he's smashing at a bag of feathers, and it takes the heart out of him. If you're fast, you'll hit him while he's standing flat and break him like he was made of sandstone. And he'll hit you while you're on the move. Keep at the rope jumping, old son!"

"I'll do that, Si. So long. I hope to get this money back to you pretty pronto."

"Forget it. If you was to give it back to me too soon, it would break the old woman's heart. She wouldn't be able to say that she told me so. How's Andy?"

"Wishing he could break away and get out among the mountains with a burro and a hammer again."

"Ah? You see what money does!" sighed Si. "It's not having it but getting it that's the fun. If I had a million dollars, wouldn't I lie awake nights wishing that I was back here at the forge shifting the hammer in my hand? I would! Being poor is a tolerable healthy thing, kid. Well, so long, if you got to go."

"So long, Si."

"Does Joe Hooker know that Larry Rawson is in town?"

"The devil!"

"He is, though, and talking pretty black about Joe."

"I'll tell him."

"You better. Larry is a hard one. He says that Joe killed a cousin of his up in Montana last year."

"Joe wasn't even in Montana last year."

"You can't tell Larry that. So long."

"So long. I'll pass the word along to Joe."

He mounted his horse and cantered down the street, and Si Jenkins watched the dust trail hook out of sight around the next corner.

"What deviltry has he been up to now?" murmured Jenkins to himself.

CHAPTER IV.

GOSSIP.

IT was hardly a scant five minutes after this that Mrs. Tom Cuttle knocked at the back door of Mrs. Sim Burton with a cup in her hand.

Mrs. Burton presently opened the door.

"Have you half a cup of brown sugar, Mary?" said Mrs. Cuttle.

"Sure I have. Come in and rest yourself while I get it."

Mrs. Cuttle sat on a stool by the stove, smiling politely, but her eye was filled with fire, and Mrs. Burton saw it. She brimmed the cup with moist brown sugar and brought it back.

"You're makin' one of those wonderful coffee cakes that your Tom loves so," suggested Mrs. Burton.

"Hmph," said Mrs. Cuttle. "Yes, I am. If men take a liking to a thing, they never get tired of it."

"Now, that's a true thing!"

"Dogs or whisky or both, when they take to 'em, they never leave 'em!"

"That's right," nodded Mrs. Burton. She knew that her neighbor was working up to a bit of gossip which would be worth hearing, but she swallowed her impatience. When gossip is on foot, it is the height of tactlessness to ask a direct question; and one of the first rules which a thorough gossip masters is that everything of importance should be brought in as a sort of aside.

So it was with the strategy of Mrs. Cuttle on this eventful day.

"Dogs is a terrible nuisance," was all Mrs. Burton could think of to help on the fray.

"Ain't they?" said Mrs. Cuttle. "That white devil that the Harkeys own, it took after my Tibby, a while ago."

"The little villain!"

"If that white dog was found poisoned one of these here days, I hope that they don't come to me askin' questions, because I'd tell 'em the truth."

"You got a mind of your own, Miranda. What happened to your cat?"

"Tibby went—scat! Right over my back fence, but the ugly brute of a dog shot through a hole in the fence and was right after her again. He almost had her tail in his mouth when she reached Si Jenkins' shop and ran up the side of it to the roof."

"What an escape!" said Mrs. Burton, wondering what all of this could be leading toward.

"And such a mouser," said Mrs. Cuttle.

"The very best!"

"I went right out to get poor Tibby. The little thing was nearly frightened to death; and while I was trying to coax it down to me from the roof, it heard the voice of a man in Si's shop, and that voice frightened it back. I was sorry. Because while I was there trying to coax Tibby down, I couldn't help overhearing some of Si Jenkins' business, with young Oliver Hardwick!"

At last it was coming! Mrs. Burton folded her arms and prepared to listen, but first she threw the door wide open, to show that all news was good news to her.

"I never thought much of Si Jenkins," she declared, "with his prize-fighting past! A very poor sort of a man to bring up children next door to!"

"Ain't I thought of that many and many a time?" said Mrs. Cuttle. "Oh, well, but my Tom swears by the man—because why? Because he tells nasty stories of his old prize-fighting days, and then my Tom comes home and tells them all over to me. 'Jenkins was down in the first round—but in the second round, he pretended to be all in and waited for a chance, and when Carson come tearing at him, Si let him have it—zam-m!' That's the sort of talk my Tom brings home from the Jenkins house. Speaking personal, I never go to see Mrs. Jenkins more'n twice a month!"

"Nor me—not if I can help it. But that Hardwick—he'll come to no good end. He's a horrid fighting boy—a regular brute. I'll never forget the first day my poor dear little Charlie met him—that was eight years ago. Charlie come home with his poor little face covered with black and blue. The frightful Hardwick boy had knocked him down and kept right on knocking Charlie down until he was in such a condition that I wanted to have the little brute arrested, but the sheriff laughed in my face."

"Well," said Mrs. Cuttle darkly, "I don't wish no trouble on nobody."

"Nor me!" breathed Mrs. Burton, her mouth agape with eagerness.

"But I guess that young Red Hardwick has enough trouble to last him for a time!"

"I hope not!" gasped out Mrs. Burton.

"I kind of fear so!"

"Fighting will take young men into mighty bad trouble."

"Fighting—and women!" breathed Mrs. Cuttle.

"Women!" gasped out Mrs. Burton.

"What else could a young man want thousands of dollars for? I ask you!"

"That he couldn't ask from Andy Connell that's so rich and so foolish about that boy!"

"That's what I said to myself. What could it be that Red Hardwick was afraid to tell Andy Connell about, and Andy fonder of him than most men are of their sons! What could it be? Thousands of dollars, Mary!"

"Oh dear, oh dear!" breathed Mrs. Burton. "How terrible! Thousands of dollars, Miranda?"

"He's been borrowin' all over the town, I guess," said Mrs. Cuttle, shaking her head sadly over such perversity.

"How can folks lend to such as him?"

"Rough men, hard men, fightin' men themselves—just think of Si Jenkins tearin' five hundred dollars from his wife and givin' it to that young Hardwick ruffian!"

"Miranda Cuttle, you don't mean it!"

"I'm tellin' you the facts as I heard them with my own ears. And Heaven knows that I didn't go there on purpose to hear! And Heaven knows that I wouldn't be here this minute, except that I know that what I tell you is like tellin' it to myself. Not a word would ever go past you, Mary."

"I hope not," said Mrs. Burton, breathing hard. "I hope to tell that I'm enough lady to keep a secret! I wouldn't do young Hardwick no harm."

"Nor me! No matter what he's been doin' by way of philandering around."

"Except that we got a sort of a public duty to the women and the young girls of Jackson Corners, Miranda."

"Mary, I suppose we have."

"Ain't they got a right to be warned what sort of a snake this Red Hardwick is?"

"They *have* a right. There ain't a shadow of a doubt of that. Though what any girl could see in that ugly boy——"

"He's got the Connell fortune behind

him. People say that Andy will be fool enough to leave most all of his millions to Red Hardwick."

"Instead of founding a school like a man of sense!"

"Or paving the town streets!"

"Or makin' a park for the folks of Jackson Corners."

"Or doin' something like a man of public spirit!"

"Well, you and me know what sort of a person Andy Connell was until he come on gold on his own farm—that he hadn't had the sense to see for all those years."

"Some say that 'Rica Connell is the one that was really behind the discovering of that gold."

"I'd not be a bit surprised!"

There was a pause, and they stared at each other wistfully. How great could the story be upon which they were to agree?

"Would you say for sure that it was a girl that he needed that money for?"

"I dunno. It ain't likely that he'd be trusted that high for gambling debts, is it?"

"Certainly not. Except by a fool! Besides, he needs the money!"

"He has to borrow all over the county. That man-killer, Joe Hooker, up and gave him eight hundred dollars—most likely robbed from some one!"

"Eight hundred dollars!"

"And five hundred from Jenkins. That's thirteen hundred dollars that I know about. And heaven alone can tell where else he has gone for money."

"How can men be such fools?"

"Birds of a feather——"

"Of course!"

"I think we ought to call in Mrs. Chandler. She's had more experience than we've had!"

"Call her in by all means! To think that your Tibby should have brought you to news like this!"

"I hope it will be the finish of that ruffian, Red Hardwick!"

"I'll do my part, Miranda."

They pledged themselves like tried and true comrades. And then Mrs. Cuttle and Mrs. Burton started off. One went up the street and one went down the street. They paused at each house not more than twenty minutes, say, and then as they left, those whom they had called upon were seen to issue forth. Sometimes they carried the red brand of gossip. Sometimes they remained behind and speculated upon the details of the crimes of Red Hardwick. So, by direct process of logical gossip, within the course of a single hour, the tale had received important variations, all as definitely known and as definitely proveable as the first tale of all.

And, by noon, a great heap of obloquy was raised towering above the head of poor Red Hardwick, for it was now known and established by the busy brains of more than half the women of Jackson Corners, that he was a young reprobate who not only had been guilty with some innocent girl, but who also had run up great gambling debts. And there was an interesting variant that he had found himself so in debt that he had swelled his allowance from Andy Connell by committing theft and that now he had been forced to borrow on every side to cover his crime.

Red Hardwick had no thought of the trail of disaster which he left behind him. He was merely cantering, at that moment, blithely to the door of the Connell house, and waving to Blackie the glad assurance that the money had been raised and that all was well!

CHAPTER V.

BLACKIE A GOOD SAMARITAN.

IT was the end of June, when the last of twilight and the first of dawn are only a stride apart; so that though the sky was already filled with the rose of the morning, no one was up when Lewis Jason Connell stepped out of the house

of his adopted father; only, from the farther side of the hill he could hear the unending mutter of engines at the mine. All the nearer side of the hill was ripped and torn away and a few ruined shacks and disintegrating piles of stone rubble showed where the mine had begun, but in the process of ten years the shafts had been sunk through the hill and out of the other side and then the vein had dipped down again toward the bowels of the earth. Lew Connell paused a moment outside the door to enjoy the brightness of the growing morning and to listen to that distant sound, like the roaring of a sea far off. No wonder that rough music contented him, for the money they were tearing from the earth was sure to find its way into his pockets, at least all that part of it which did not go to Red Hardwick's share.

Then he hurried on to the corral, caught a handsome brown gelding from the group of fine saddle horses which were kept there, and rode hastily toward Jackson Corners. By sunup, the way was half spent, and Blackie, singing as he whirled along at full speed, saw the blinding brightness of the sun strike on a wretched figure by the road. It was a Mexican who had fallen far into bad fortune. He was young, indeed, but there was an old misery in his face—a sullen, lined, haggard face. One could see despair and sheer hunger in that face, and the eye which looked up to young Blackie Connell through a ragged black forelock was like the eye of a wild beast, filled with savage envy. He sat on a hump of earth by the road; there was not even a cigarette in his fingers.

And Connell drew up in a cloud of dust. He was immensely gratified, for some reason, by the shocking face of poverty which he saw in this poor creature. If fortune had not come to his aid, he himself might have gone through his life as a pauper, and therefore becoming a drifter, a criminal unless luck befriended him. For he could look far enough and honestly enough into his own nature to see the weaknesses of it. The Mexican did not so much as glance up at him; not a word came from his lips in answer to the cheerful: "Good morning!" of Blackie.

"Here," said Blackie. "This will cheer you up!"

And like the king to the leper, he drew out no less than a twenty-dollar bill and tossed it fluttering toward the man. It fell unregarded in the dust before the feet of the man. No, not unregarded, for the man was turned to stone, and in his face there was an expression of utter astonishment almost as strong as terror itself.

Words would come, in another moment. But Blackie did not even wait for the dirty hand of the poor fellow to snatch at the money; he loosed his rein and rode on again at a swift gallop. After all, he could well spare that twenty dollars when he had in his pockets two thousand dollars which had been given to him without security, merely for the asking. If Red ever strove to close in on him for the repayment of that money, he would find it a difficult collection!

So Blackie laughed to himself in the greatness of his spirits! He felt far less gratitude to Red than mere amusement over the folly of his foster brother. For who but the greatest fool in the world lends such a sum of money in cash without taking in turn for it a note of some sort? And now, such was his affluence, that he had been able to ride like a god into the life of another man, toss him with a careless gesture renewed hope in life, and then ride on once more without having felt the gift he had just made.

It had always been that way in his relations with Red. For, though young Hardwick had many an enemy, Blackie understood well enough that not one of those enmities was founded upon any-

thing of importance. There was no cardinal fault in Red. And when the crisis came he could always be depended upon for absolute honesty, loyalty, courage, devotion. There was a reckless good nature in Red which made him risk his very neck for the sake of another man he despised. And yet he rarely reaped any great reward for the good things he did. Chiefly, no doubt, because the good actions of Red were performed as a matter of course, off hand, without posing and preparations to make them seem grander. And, once done, he never referred to them afterward. With Blackie, this was a far different matter. And he felt that he could look upon this morning and say, honestly, that he had never before given away money to a stranger! Not once before in all his life!

That was the real basis of his happy mood on this morning. Not the mere fact that he had in his pocket enough to pay the exactions of Lew Bender, but because he felt that these recent events went to prove, again, the invincibility of his cleverness. Only now and again, during his life, there swept over him a certain feeling of dread and a gloomy foreknowledge that fate would, eventually give to Red the great reward for his goodness and crush him, Blackie Connell, for the real evil in his nature. But, like many another sinner, Blackie allowed none of these thoughts to grow too great in his mind. And this morning, in particular, he felt that he sat on the topmost peak of the world.

When he reached Jackson Corners, there was only a beginning of a stir of life; but the busy little village was almost silent. Only here and there smoke was rising from a chimney; it would still be an hour before the bulk of the housewives rose to their breakfast cookeries. And, in the meantime, the sun was already high and bright in the east!

At the hotel, he found the proprietor newly up, still unshaven, bleared of eye, and chewing with distasteful writhings of the mouth at a cigar butt of the evening before.

"Well?" he said to Blackie, speaking around the odorous butt.

"Show me the room of Mr. Bender," said Blackie.

The proprietor led him up the complaining stairway. "You know this here Bender, I guess?" said he.

"Yes," said Blackie, and he added defensively: "Why not?"

"Why not?" said the proprietor, halting and squinting at his companion. "Well, sir, everybody's business is his own business. I ain't askin' you for no free information, Connell. Only, I'd like to give *you* some."

"Very well," said Blackie coldly.

"You might step out and tell this here friend of yours—this here Bender, as you call him—you might tell him that we're mighty simple people in Jackson Corners, and there's a lot of things in life that we don't know nothin' about. And particular you might say to him that there's a whole pile of things that we don't *want* to know about. Y'understand? And one of 'em is: How to talk to a pack of cards so's they answer back to your voice!"

He paused and glared more savagely at Blackie. Then he added: "I'm only making a suggestion. If this here bunkie of yours wants to live peaceable in Jackson Corners, maybe it'd be a good idea for him to know. Some of the boys are sort of curious already. They even been talking about *asking* him what he says to the cards!"

He said this with a very significant sneer, and then guided his guest on down the hall to a door on which he knocked and then retreated. It was not until Connell had repeated that knock twice that he received a weak, groaning answer.

"Open the door," said Blackie, trying the knob with a rude rattling. "It's I!"

"Oh," muttered the other, and presently the bed springs creaked, and then the floor quivered under his step. He opened the door with a jerk and waved Connell in.

"This is about the time that you start stirring around, I suppose? This is the average beginning of a day for you, Connell?"

"I've got the money," said Blackie.

"What money?"

"I guess you've forgotten about it, eh?"

"Oh," murmured the other, as the light poured in upon his brain at last. "You got the stuff!"

He ran back to the bed and sat up against the pillows. Then, with nervous fingers, he reached for a cigarette, lighted it, and began to smoke with a jerky rapidity, blowing forth the clouds in strong puffs.

"All right, all right!" he snapped out. "Lemme have it, will you? Are you paying a visit, or money? But you're a good kid, Connell," he went on more smoothly, changing his expression. "You ran into a lot of bad luck. The ponies ran like a lot of fools when you started playing them. The next time, better luck. And believe me, kid, I can show you the way to the better luck!"

"I have the cash here," said Blackie, too disgusted to prolong the conversation, and he handed from his wallet a great mass of compacted bills.

"All in chicken feed!" snarled out the tout. "What in the devil's the idea? All chicken feed!"

He began to count the money with a lightning rapidity, simply letting the bills drift through his fingers, so it seemed. Presently he swept the crumpled heap together and glared at Blackie.

"Only seventeen hundred!" he snapped out.

"That's it," nodded Blackie. "I couldn't raise a penny more for you. That's your ticket out and your ticket back, and your fifteen hundred with a little left over."

"What about my time?" snarled out the gambler. "Ain't that anything? Am I a fifteen-a-week bum? Do I count for nothing? No, kid, I'm letting you off easy as it is. Go back and collect the other three hundred. You're an active boy, and you got a lot of hours before noon. I want that three hundred back here then!"

Blackie made a wry face and drew out his wallet with a sigh. "All right," said he. "It's robbery, but you've had me under your thumb! Well, here's the other three hundred."

The tout grinned broadly as he counted it. "Trying to pull one on me?" he suggested. "But I ain't a boob, kid. Not yet!"

"Another thing," said Blackie dryly, "and I'm giving this free. The boys are on to you already. You've been showing your hand too much, and if you want to keep good health, Bender, I advise you to drift along to new diggings."

"Who filled you full of this line of chatter?" barked out the other, scowling.

"The proprietor. He's rather hard boiled, Bender. And so are some of the others in the town. They don't like the way you make the cards talk."

"A lot of tinhorn sports!" snarled out Bender. "I didn't touch them for more than a hundred and fifty, last night!"

"No? That means a good deal in this part of the world. But it isn't what you do; it's the way you do it that counts out here. Take my advice and blow, Bender!"

The other shrugged the bedding higher around his narrow chest. "I dunno," said he. "This ain't so bad. I figger this town is luck, for me. Here I am two thousand in, besides the chicken feed that I picked up from the boys last night. And maybe I'll be able to pick up some more stuff—here and there—here and there!"

He added: "But if they try rough stuff, I'm the kid that eats it! I know their gun play. I ain't so slow with a gat myself. And where they keep bean shooters, I keep a hose!"

He pulled out a shining automatic. "It sprays lead!" grinned Bender.

"I don't see what you gain by staying on here," said Blackie with a sudden touch of anxiety.

"You don't?" chuckled Bender. "When I find a goose that lays golden eggs, am I going to turn loose from it so quick you'd think that my hands were burned? Not me!"

A dull flush ran over the face of Blackie. "You'll stay here to dig gold in me?" he asked.

"Don't be so rough, kid!"

"What have you over me?"

"Oh, I dunno. I might try talking to old man Connell, you know, and telling him a few yarns about what you do with your allowance. I'm not saying that I would, you know. But in a pinch, if I needed a hand-out and you were a little tight—I might try a line like that on Connell, kid. What would you say?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE MEXICAN RENEGADE PLOTS.

THERE was, indeed, nothing for Blackie to say, and he remained quiet, staring at Bender.

A shiver ran through the smaller man.

"Don't look at me that way, kid," said the gambler. "It gives me the willies. I ain't a snake. I'm just sensible. Put yourself in my place, and what would *you* do? I ain't gunna bleed you white. But only in case that I'm down and out—a man likes to know where he can put his hand on a—friend!" He brought out the last word with another grin.

"You mean blackmail—as long as you can work it on me," said Blackie. "But, as a matter of fact, I think it's all a bluff. I think you wouldn't have the courage to face Andy Connell with your yarn."

Bender shrugged his shoulders securely. "Maybe you're right," said he. "But if you lay on that, you're betting long odds. Well, I ain't holding you up to-day, anyway. Run along and have a good time. Only, don't suggest that I leave Jackson Corners too quick! I like this place. Sleepy looking, but a lot stirring behind the face of things! Eh?"

Blackie went slowly from the room, and in the dining room of the hotel he ate his breakfast in dark and silent thoughtfulness. Now that he reviewed the whole matter he felt that he should have known in the first place what was coming. The ease with which the tout had bled his victim would keep The Rat on that trail until——

Well, what would end it? After all, the story Bender could tell was not such a damning enormity. But if it were told to Connell, with that man's strange semireligious obsessions and unreasonable prejudices against gambling, particularly gambling for young men, Blackie had few doubts of the result. It might be many years before Connell died, and during all of that time, The Rat would be a constant menace to the life, liberty, and happiness, so to speak, of Lewis Jason Connell.

Finally he got up and took his horse from the hitching rack in front of the hotel and passed on down the street, but all the joyous sense of superiority was gone from him. And he was still letting the horse blunder along, head down, on a loose rein, when a thrilling, cheerful voice hailed him suddenly.

He looked up and saw before him none other than the ragged Mexican to whom he had given alms. But how changed was the man! Indeed, his face was hardly recognizable. Half of the seams had disappeared. His head was carried high. The hungry look was gone, and the despair was gone, also.

His step was light, and the only sign that he was famished was the tightness of the belt that ate into his lean middle, drawn to the last hole. But the dust had been brushed from his clothes. His ragged forelock had been brushed back, and now as he waved his hat and hailed his benefactor, he could have stood for a picture of a man crying: "Gold!" or "The Promised Land!" All that was happy was in his face.

"Señor, señor!" cried he to young Lewis Connell. "It is the blessing of God that I have been permitted to see your face again so that I may give you my thanks."

"It isn't a matter for many thanks," said Blackie mildly.

"To you, no," said the Mexican. "But to me, it is salvation! Consider, señor, that an hour ago the world for me was filled with cruel devils, not with men. That there was nothing left for me except to kill or to die like a starved dog. And now, señor, God has sent you to me to save me. He sent you to me like a part of the bright morning. God bless you forever!"

Blackie shook his head with a melancholy smile, and the expression of the Mexican changed to one of the most tender sympathy.

"Ah," said he, "your own happiness is gone. You have given it away to me with this money. Did you give me too much? Then take it back!"

He held out the bill, continuing: "It is not the money which saves me, but the kind heart behind the money, my benefactor!"

"Keep it, keep it!" said Blackie hastily, ashamed of the impulse which had made him make a half gesture toward receiving back the alms. "I am happy enough. Good morning, my friend."

He would have ridden on, but the Mexican stood in the trail and barred the way with his arms eagerly stretched out to the side.

"I am your servant, señor. When my master is in trouble, what is my happiness except to serve him? And there is trouble in your face, señor."

Blackie scowled gloomily down upon him. "What is your name?" he asked.

"I am José Ridal."

"José Ridal, have you had an enemy?"

"Ah," said José. "Do you see me now in rags, without even a horse to ride, with an empty pocket, with a starved belly? Yes, señor, I have had an enemy! I have had an enemy!"

The concentrated malice of a great hate darkened his eyes. "I, too," said Blackie, "have an enemy."

The Mexican's smile flashed eagerly.

"See, señor," cried he, "how God intended us for one another? You to save my life from despair and my own hands. I to find the enemy of my master and put my heel on the head of the snake! Is it not true?"

The malice in the heart of Blackie swelled in a hot wave into his very throat; and now he was looking greedily into the soul of the man before him. It was very true. The lean cut of that fighting jaw, the keen black eyes, the hawk nose, the light, athletic body, the long, nervous hands—all were the details which go to the making of a man of action. Here was one who would kill to-day and forget his killing on the morrow. Here was a man untroubled by a conscience! And, suddenly, it seemed to Blackie that the overruling fates which controlled his life had indeed offered this man into his hand as a weapon to be used in this crisis. And why should not the thing be done? Was it not safe?

Certainly, if the thing were attempted and the Mexican were caught before or after the act, he would never open his lips to speak against his benefactor of that morning.

"If it is a man," José Ridal was saying, "only tell me his name. Do not tell me any more."

And, as he spoke, he slipped his hand into his belt. There was a knife there; Blackie did not need to see the weapon with his eye. The suggestion was too strong.

"I shall tell you his name," said he, "but not because I want you to rid the world of the devil. He is Lew Bender, in Jackson Corners. If you find there a single human being who has a good word to speak for him——"

"He will be speaking about the dead before the night comes on this day," declared the Mexican gravely. "Señor Bender is dead, and you, Señor——"

"I am Lewis Connell."

"Señor Connell, think of this man no more. I have an assurance from heaven. It is not a sin to do this thing. It is intended; it is a necessary thing. And it is done! Adios, my master."

"Adios, José."

The Mexican whirled and passed him almost on the run, as he strode lightly off toward Jackson Corners, now lifting its roofs above the depression in which it stood.

Who would ever have selected that gay figure as that of a murderer? But Blackie already could see the knife strike home. He shuddered a little; but then he shrugged back his shoulders. At the most, how could he be condemned for this thing? Even if the Mexican were caught and testified against him, what was the word of a Mexican renegade compared to that of the adopted son of rich Andy Connell?

But his spirits revived, now. As quickly as he had fallen into black depression, his heart now rose, and he let his horse break into a free canter, swinging him down the road toward the old Connell house. From the distance he could see everything that was happening. Andy Connell was behind the house swinging the ax to cut up wood for the stove. It was a duty which he frequently had refused to turn over to either of the young men.

In the corral by the barn there was the inevitable Joe Hooker, who seemed to live and breathe only for the sake of being with Red Hardwick. Joe was now sitting on a fence and whittling wood while he watched Red work on Spitfire. And, certainly, Red had made great progress. He was seated on the back of the mare—without bridle or saddle to help him—merely perched aloft on her bare back, securing her only with a twist of light rope around her neck and nose. He was soothing her with his hand and doubtless with his voice. So much Blackie could make out from the distance. Then, as he drew nearer, he saw the mare grow restless, saw her take a few dancing steps—then a flick into the air and Red rose in a high arch, tumbled head over heels in mid-air, and landed heavily on the corral, while Spitfire flaunted her heels high and fled to the far side of the corral.

"She's killed him!" muttered Blackie, half in horror and half hopefully.

But here Red arose and went staggering back toward the mare.

"He'll cut her to bits with the blacksnake, I suppose," said Blackie.

But no, with extended hand Red went slowly toward the mare. Now he had cornered her again. Now he stood at her head soothing her. As if she had done a good act and needed a reward! Blackie shook his head.

He could not understand. No, he did not even want to try to understand such insane folly! So he pushed the gelding ahead. In the door of the shack stood Mrs. Connell, the one congenial spirit that he found in his home, because they understood one another and need not play parts when they were alone together.

He came up to the house whistling. And Frederica Connell met him with a grin at the door.

"What deviltry have you been up to now?" she asked.

"Deviltry?" said Blackie, making his face smoothly bland.

"Because," said she, "I've never known anything else to make you sing."

CHAPTER VII.

SHERIFF GUERNSEY TALKS.

THE sun of that day gathered strength as it rose in the sky. Already by nine in the morning the temperature was eighty in the shade; it was eighty-five at ten, at eleven o'clock it was past ninety, and by half-past eleven, it was verging toward a hundred. It was a dull, still day. Where the horse of Joe Hooker trotted down the street with sweat starting from every pore of its body, the dust rose from each step and hung in the air in separate little clouds, slowly dissolving; and when Joe stopped his horse in front of the hotel the dust cloud gathered thick around him and turned the hot, wet horse to a sudden gray.

First he gave the animal two mouthfuls of water. Then he tethered it at the corner of the hitching rack, under the canopy of the shed which gave shelter from rain in winter and sun in summer. At this angle, whatever breeze arose would blow upon his mount. Then he climbed the steps of the veranda and picked out a chair in the line of idlers. He loosed the bandanna around his neck. He blew his own breath inside the enormous neckband of his shirt to cool his baked body. Then he had recourse to the usual cigarette.

"Where you been, Joe?" asked a neighbor.

"Out to the Connell place."

"What they doing?"

"In the mine?"

"Sure."

"I dunno. I was with Red. The mine don't bother him none. He's riding a new hoss."

"Is he good in the saddle?"

"He ain't bad. He can learn."

"They say that he works out with you, using a Colt, every day. Going to make a fighter out of him?"

"Them that know *how* to handle a gun," said Joe Hooker, "is the ones that don't have no fights. Because they know that a gun pulling means a killing."

"That's news to me."

"Is it? Look over the list of killings that you hear about. Some fool gets drunk and starts waving his arms. Then he's shot or he shoots somebody else. But mostly it's the young kids and the tenderfeet. They ain't had their guns very long. They manage to hit a target a couple of times. Then they feel that the best way to talk is to talk with a gat. That's the trouble with 'em! They have their guns out instead of talking. And bullets make a sort of a sad conversation."

"They do, at that. But somehow, Joe, I wouldn't pick you for a plumb peaceable man!"

There was a little murmur of laughter at this, and a young Mexican who was sitting on the farther side of Hooker, turned a bright, inquisitive eye toward Hooker—a ragged man, with a lined face from which recent privations were disappearing only very gradually. But he had a cigarette between his fingers, and his eyes were still half sleepy from a recent meal of unusual size. Now he studied Hooker attentively, and glanced down toward the butt of the gun which peered from above the edge of the holster at the cow-puncher's hip.

There had been a little chuckle of agreement from the bystanders at the last remark, and now Hooker regarded them all with a slow, sad eye.

"When I was a kid," he explained, "I used to love trouble. And the name still stays by me. There ain't nobody that don't think that I love a gun and a gun play. And that's why I pack a gat. Some day I'm gunna take a ship and go

off to some island where there ain't such a thing as a gun known, and there I'm gunna settle down real peaceable, some day!"

Another murmur greeted this announcement, and there was a sigh of answer from Joe, as though he realized that it would be impossible to convince these people and therefore gave up the argument on the spot.

Here, however, a dust cloud appeared down the street and swept rapidly toward them.

"Who's fool enough," said one, "to ride a hoss like that in this sort of weather? Some fool kid, I guess."

"Or Sid Guernsey," suggested Hooker. "He's always in a hurry, doggone me if he ain't!"

The dust cloud dissolved as the stranger drew nearer. Then it was seen that it was indeed the sheriff, and many heads nodded and many eyes turned toward Joe in approbation of his insight.

The sheriff jumped off his horse and threw the reins. The poor creature was black with running sweat which washed away the dust as fast as it settled; it was trembling with excitement and weariness, and its flanks were stippled with red where the spurs of the sheriff had urged it along.

He was a little man, was Sheriff Sid Guernsey. He was about thirty, but a hard, active life full of burdens made him seem at least ten years older.

"Make Sid sheriff," had been the cry two years before. "He'll act like the county was a bank and he was the president of it."

So they had made him sheriff, and he had lived up to every prediction. Nothing was too small for the attention of the sheriff. He not only apprehended criminals after their crimes, but he exerted himself chiefly toward preventing the crimes themselves. He was like the father of a family, and went around lecturing those who were in the process of becoming dangers to society. He became a sort of paternal tyrant, and the things he did could never have been upheld in a court of law. However, they were upheld in that county, which wanted peace at any price. They knew that the sheriff was honest; they only hoped he did not worry himself to death before he brought the whole society to a peaceful condition.

In the meantime, he brushed from his trousers the dust which had settled as a thick powder in the wrinkles as he rode. He turned his bandanna around so that the flap hung down between his shoulder blades, where his shirt was black with his own perspiration. Then he ran up the steps of the veranda and stood there for a moment, turning his head with quick little birdlike motions as he scanned face after face, nodding his silent answers to their greetings.

"You," said he, suddenly cocking and leveling a forefinger like a revolver at the sleek, sporty form of Lew Bender, "you, stranger, wear the name of Lew Bender, I hear?"

"I ain't had the pleasure of meeting you," declared Lew Bender.

"You're lucky," said the sheriff in his dry, snapping voice. "I'm the sort that gents hate to meet, and I hate to meet gents. And I hope that I don't have to meet you, Bender. I'm sheriff Sid Guernsey, if you're curious."

"Hello, sheriff," said Bender, changing color a little, but then, shrugging his shoulders, he added: "You got nothing on me, old-timer."

"I got nothing on you," declared the sheriff, "and I don't hope to have nothing on you. I hate trouble! Only, I been hearing that you get pretty friendly with the cards. Y'understand me? They say that you got a sort of an instinct for the cards. They talk to you —and you talk to them! Well, son, we hate that kind of language worse'n cussing in these parts. We like just one kind of talk. You remember that, and don't start forgetting it. That's all!"

He turned his back on Bender and walked with his quick, jerky step to tall Joe Hooker and stood right over him, with forefinger cocked and pointed again, like a gun.

"Joe, I hear that Larry Rawson is in town!"

"Maybe you do, and maybe he is," said Joe Hooker, yawning. "But I ain't seen him."

"You don't have to tell me that," said the sheriff. "If you'd met up with him, I'd of heard the guns talking about it. Now, look here, Joe, I've got this to say: If you meet up with Larry and there's a fight, I ain't gunna listen to no talk about self-defense. I'm gunna take you to the lockup and put you in. And I'm gunna see that you get a trial before twelve gents that ain't your friends. I'm gunna see that you're tried for *murder,* Joe!"

"You talk," said Joe, "as though I was sure to fight with this fellow and as if I was sure to kill him if we *did* fight."

"That's what'll happen. Rawson is here after you, and you know it."

"If Rawson's in danger, then go tell him. *I* ain't hunting for him."

"I've told him. But Rawson's a hard-headed fool. He's too young to know any better, and you ain't. Joe, I want you to up and leave Jackson Corners for a few days."

Joe Hooker growled deep in his throat. "I'm to side-step this here Rawson, am I?" said he. "Sheriff, you're all right, and I'm for you. But you can't go too far with me! If you got something on me, put me in jail. If you ain't got nothing on me, keep your hands and your talk to yourself! I don't want to hear it!"

The sheriff turned purple with anger. He shook from head to foot with the pure excess of emotion.

"All right," said he. "You got the right to stay here in town. But if you meet up with Rawson——"

"Ain't he a growed-up man? Ain't he got sense? Can't he handle a gun as good as the next man?"

"He's all those things, but he ain't sure death and poison with a gun the way you are, Joe, and you know it. And if you kill Rawson, I'll make Jackson Corners the hottest place for you that you'll ever meet up with till you go to the devil. Y'understand me?"

But Joe Hooker's temper had been growing every moment, and now his face was livid; yet the voice with which he answered had grown very soft.

"You've said your little piece," he declared. "Now just step out and set down and rest yourself. I'm tired of listening to foolishness. I don't need no lessons in manners!"

For a moment the sheriff still stood over him, his face working, but then he decided that words would, indeed, be wasted in this place. He turned upon his heel and walked straight into the hotel, leaving a thick blanket of silence behind him. Even the wiping of perspiration from dripping faces was done with furtive movements; and the men looked at one another askance, like pupils in a schoolroom after the teacher has spoken words of stern reproof.

The first to stir was Lew Bender, who rose from his chair muttering: "Aw, the devil—what a guy!"

He received no response, however, and so he strolled off the veranda and into the scattering shade of the pine trees near by—and almost at once, the young Mexican rose also, snapped his cigarette out into the dust of the street, and went leisurely in the same direction that Bender had taken among the trees.

When he was well out of sight of the hotel, however, and deep among the trees, José Ridal stepped behind a sapling and snatched out a revolver. He looked to it carefully, swiftly, seemed to make sure that all was well with its working parts, and then put it away in his clothes again.

Presently he started on, and after a moment he came in sight of Lew Bender, who was walking slowly among the trees, pausing now and again to kick a pebble out of his path. Evidently all was not well with Lew Bender. And he needed something on which he could vent his emotion.

At that thought, the Mexican smiled with a mirthless enjoyment of the thing before him. Here he saw the gambler lean over to pick something from the ground, and as he did so, his clothes being drawn taut, José Ridal saw the outline of a gun stamped clearly in the back trouser pocket of Bender.

At this, he smiled and nodded again, and then hurried after the other until Bender turned at the sound of the approaching footfalls.

"Well?" said Bender.

"I have a message for you, *amigo* mio," said José Ridal, "and here I have found you alone—which is the best place to know what I have to say!"

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GUN FIGHTS.

IN the meantime, on the veranda of the hotel, the silence which the sheriff left behind him continued for a time uninterrupted, flowing like a dismal river through the minds of the men. They glanced at one another and they turned their eyes at last to Joe Hooker. At length it was decided by one of the older men that the talk should be turned on something else.

He got up and took a chair nearer to Joe.

"The sheriff is going too darn far!" broke out Joe hotly, mistaking the meaning of this approach.

At this, his companion nodded without enthusiasm and let his eyes follow a spinning whirlpool of dust which was walking down the street, though no breath of wind was felt along the hot veranda. Every instant that heat was increasing. From the white painted houses across the street a terrible reflection beat against their eyes, searing them with brilliancy and with intense violence. And still the wind did not come; and still faces grew redder, and breathing more labored. Above the roofs of the houses waving lines of heat were springing up continually and dissolving into the flaring blue-white of the horizon sky.

"The darn flies!" groaned Joe's recent companion, slapping at his ankles. "They get teeth like bulldogs in days like this. Darned if they ain't a hungry lot and a brave lot! What's this news that I hear about your friend, Red Hardwick?"

"Bad news, is it?" asked Joe gloomily. "Nobody ever asks to hear any news about the good things that happen to you or to your friends. Well, what's up?"

The other lowered his voice. "It's the yarn that they're passing around town."

"What yarn?"

"About the trouble that he got into."

"I don't know about no trouble."

The other smiled wisely. "Sure, you'd keep mum. But it's too bad, ain't it?"

"What's too bad? Don't talk so mysterious."

"Why, about the girl that——"

"Red and a girl?"

"I dunno except what everybody says—and about how he went around borrowing money from everybody to get out of his scrape. He got to you for about a thousand, somebody was telling me, or was it two thousand, Joe?"

Joe Hooker snorted with rage.

"It was not," said he. "I never said that he borrowed a cent from me! The other yarn about him is a lie, too. I know Red, and I know what goes on inside of his head. He ain't that kind, and you can put up your money on it! And," continued Joe with violence,

"some of these birds that are talking about him will run into a pack of trouble if Red comes to the lee side of what they're saying!"

The other grew blankly silent. "I'm only telling you what I hear——" he began.

"Some folks," said Joe bitterly, "have got the sort of ears that pick up rotten bad news. They're like buzzards. They live on dead things, and they watch the dying things."

A voice spoke up suddenly from the far end of the veranda—a voice half subdued but with a startled note in it that reached every ear:

"Rawson, by the heavens!"

And Larry Rawson himself came swinging slowly up the street, a tall, handsome young fellow, very brown of face, very cheerful of eye. He came straight toward the hotel, and at his coming, men suddenly began to rise from either side of Joe Hooker and move away. Some crowded back through the door of the hotel and hung there in a dense crowd to watch. And some side-stepped to the very ends of the veranda. They formed in three groups, and thereby they forced the issue that might never have come to a show-down.

For Larry Rawson, advancing up the steps of the veranda, saw all the people cleared away from the center of the porch, and all eyes were pressing upon him. Something was expected of him. That was plain. And in the very center of the stage, spilled loosely back in a chair with his shoulders tilted against the wall of the building, he saw the other main actor besides himself—Joe Hooker!

Something was expected of Larry, and he saw instantly what he would have to do if he wished to call himself a man thereafter in the West. But, in that moment, he cursed the "redeye" and the looseness of tongue which had made him repeat, with bitterness, certain dark things that had been rumored about the tall gun fighter in the last letters he had from his relations in Montana.

Yet, however much he might doubt the outcome of this engagement, he did not for an instant hesitate. His course was clear before him; he had a thing to do, and he knew just what that thing must be. So he went straight to tall Joe Hooker and stood above him, with an unsmiling face.

"You're Hooker," he said.

"I'm Joe Hooker," admitted the cowpuncher.

"D'you know me?"

"I guess I know you. You're Larry Rawson."

And then Joe made the greatest step, perhaps, that he had ever made in his life toward solving a difficult situation without the use of violence. He said:

"Set down, Rawson, and tell me how things are with you. Set down and have a smoke." And he held out the makings.

Now, for a vital instant, Larry Rawson hesitated. He wanted with all his heart to accept that smoke and sit down with Joe Hooker and tell him, frankly, all that he had heard, and let Hooker defend himself from the imputation if he could. But the battery of many eyes of strangers was upon him. And, no matter how he yearned to do as he was bidden, he forced himself to shake his head.

"I'd like to do it, Joe," he admitted. "But before I can do that, I got to have a little talk with you about some things that I've heard."

Joe Hooker tucked the makings back into his vest pocket. "All right," said he. "Lemme hear what you got to say, Rawson."

"You was up in Montana last year?"

Joe Hooker pushed back his hat and scratched his head.

"I dunno that I was," said he. "Well, I was up through Idaho—no, I guess

that I didn't get across the border into Montana. Why?"

Rawson had turned a dark red.

"You never seen the town of Somerset in Montana?" he asked sharply.

"No," drawled out Joe Hooker, still in thought. "I never seen the town of Somerset."

Rawson laughed harshly. "And you was never seen there by any of the boys, I guess?" he added.

Hooker shrugged his shoulders. "I dunno what anybody seen—or thought that they seen."

"Maybe it was your ghost," suggested Rawson with an increasing bitterness.

Hooker said not a word.

"Because," said Rawson, "it's sort of queer. I'll tell you what happened. My cousin, Dan Rawson, the finest kid and the squarest shooter that ever throwed a leg over the back of a hoss—he was in his shack in Somerset cookin' his supper. The neighbors seen him through the window, walkin' back and forth. And then they seen somebody go up to the front door and walk into the cabin. And after a minute, they heard a gun go off—not two guns, but just one gun!"

"Ah?" murmured Hooker.

"You don't remember nothing?"

"I'm hearing you talk, Rawson, I'm not remembering nothing, or I'd do some talking myself." This with some asperity.

Larry Rawson moistened his dry, trembling lips and went on: "Then a gent was seen running out of the house and down the street—and some of the boys that seen him run, they said that he had the look of you, Joe Hooker!"

The tremor of his lips had become a tremor of his entire body. Then he added with a strained, deep voice of pain: "When they come into the house, and when they looked for poor Dan, where did they see him? Over by the sink, on his face, with a bullet through his back—he'd been shot in the back!"

"Wait a minute," said Joe Hooker. "What time of day was it?"

"It was the evening; Dan was cooking his supper, just the way that I been telling you!"

"It was sort of dark, was it?"

"I dunno."

"Was the lamps lighted?"

"Yes, they was. It was by the lamplight that they seen Dan walking around in his kitchen."

"Look here, old son, if it was near dark, how'd it happen that the boys was able to recognize me as I was running down the street—according to what you say?"

It was a puzzler for Larry Rawson. And, though his mind had been more than half made up during the recital of the tragedy, he found himself fumbling, now, and unable to make any answer.

"Only," he said, "you ain't a man that looks like other men, Hooker. You ain't the same kind. It ain't likely that folks would mistake you for another. Sam Hewitt, he passed right by on the street, and he said——"

And, at this instant, at the very moment when an amicable agreement seemed about to take place, fate intervened cruelly. From the grove of pine trees which circled the Jackson Corners hotel on the one side, two revolver shots barked across the heavy air of the midday, two shots chiming almost as one. Then on the heels of that noise came a scream of agony, of fear, that was cut away and died suddenly in the midst of the cry, as though a hand had been clapped across the lips of the tortured man. And no one who heard it needed to be told that the hand was the hand of death!

And the shots and the cry made Joe Hooker bound to his feet—made Larry Rawson start back with a cry: "Hooker, you're a murderer!"

"You lie!"

"And here's paying you back in full!"

Larry Rawson was no novice. His

gun came into his hand as a lightning flash comes into a storm-darkened sky; and yet, before he could press the trigger, the gun of tall Joe Hooker had spoken.

Rawson, shot through the body, slumped heavily upon his side to the floor of the veranda. He raised the gun for a final effort, but Joe Hooker kicked it from the half-numbed fingers. Then he leaped for the street and his horse at the same instant that the shrill, sharp voice of the sheriff within the hotel began to scream: "Stand back—let me out—there's some devil's work going on!"

Joe Hooker was in his saddle by that time and flying down the street as the sheriff burst through the tangled crowd in the doorway of the hotel. He saw the fugitive disappearing in a mist of dust down the white street; he saw the wounded man and leaped to him.

"How are you, Rawson?" he snarled.

"It was a fair fight," gasped out Rawson. "He beat me fair. I made—the first move—— Lord!"

His eyes closed, and then he lay still.

The sheriff did not wait to make sure that his man was dead. He turned with a scream of rage and grief on the others.

"You murderin' cowards!" he shouted at them. "But I'll have Joe Hooker for this. You hear me swear it—and I never leave his trail until I've got him! Never!"

CHAPTER IX.

RAWSON HAS HIS WAY.

NO one could be blamed, at such a moment, with such a gun fight under their eyes, for failing to give heed to another tragedy not a hundred yards away where, among the little second-growth pines which the hotel owner hoped; on a day, would supply him with firewood, lay Lew Bender on his face with his arms cast out before him, each hand loosely filled with pine needles as he had gripped at the earth in his brief death agony. No one thought of Lew Bender then; and it was only afterward that Mrs. Tom Cuttle could remember how she had seen the form of the Mexican as he skulked out of the wood at the rear of the hotel.

He went quickly toward the corrals behind the building and, while half a dozen other men worked there, saddling their horses and then rushing away to follow the sheriff in his pursuit of the first criminal, José Ridal found an old tattered saddle in a shed, and a little, ugly, roach-backed, lump-headed mustang. He saddled that horse, for he saw in it certain qualities of toughness which, as he guessed, might stand him in very good stead in the days which were to come. Thus equipped, he patched up a broken bridle, and well after the main hue and cry had poured out of Jackson Corners on the trail of the luckless Joe Hooker, Ridal left the town in a different direction and headed straight for the northern hills. Southward lay his own land and his own people, but to return to them, for certain very strong reasons, would be putting a noose around his neck—or, more likely, sliding a knife between his ribs. So he rode north, wondering in his heart of hearts at the strange Providence which had provided such a diversion and carried the wrath of the keepers of the law upon other heads at the very instant when he committed his crime. No one followed him. He presently had the trail to himself and let the mustang jog comfortably along it.

He seemed, indeed, to be jogging without danger out of the picture; but he himself knew that the danger was gathering more terribly than ever around him, no matter how far removed it might be. For, on the day, he had become not only a man slayer, but a horse thief also. And he knew that for either crime there was only one approved penalty among the rough men of the mountain desert.

But, while the Mexican journeyed north, secured for the moment from trouble, and deliciously conscious of sixteen dollars and plenty of tobacco in his pockets, new things were happening at Jackson Corners, and the chief of them concerned young Larry Rawson.

The doctor, when he first saw the wound and leaned over the youngster, simply said aloud: "A goner! The boy is dying! He won't live five minutes. He ought to have been dead five minutes before this!"

That was the last important tidings of Rawson which the late riders from the town carried out to the sheriff where he was toiling on the trail of Joe Hooker. Rawson, they announced, was dead.

"Now," said the sheriff to them, "are you willing to shoot, and shoot to kill when you sight Joe Hooker?"

And they admitted that they were. It was not that the thing had not been fair fight. It was not that Rawson, in a way, had not forced the fight upon Hooker; but Joe was too old a hand, and these gun-fighting stories had been told about him too often.

But, in the meantime, with the infinite strength of youth, Larry Rawson, back on the veranda of the hotel where he had first fallen and where his blood had first made the crimson smear on the porch, had sighed, groaned, and opened his eyes.

But they were dull eyes, and the lips which had framed the sigh hung limp and lifeless, agape.

"That's the death struggle of poor Rawson," said the doctor.

"His eyes are open!" whispered an awed onlooker.

"Why, youngster, the eyes of a man always open when he dies."

"You lose." gasped out a choked and whispering voice from the floor of the veranda. "I ain't dead!"

The doctor was properly taken aback. He looked, for an instant, as though he were hearing a voice from the grave. But he dropped on his knees beside the sufferer and took his pulse with skillful fingers.

"Rawson," he said, "I'm sorry to tell you that you are not long for this world. You are about to die, young man, and——"

"You die!" gasped out the young cowpuncher. "I got—fifty—years of livin' ahead of me! And—I'm gunna live—to clean up on that Hooker!"

The doctor could not help grinning. "All right," said he cheerfully. "If you say that you're going to live, Larry, you are. If that bullet twisted its way through you without tearing your vitals to bits, you *will* live. But if it *did* go through without killing you, it's a trained bullet and you ought to save it for a charm! Now, son, keep your mind fixed on that: If you say that you can live, you *can* live, and I'm going to help you out!"

So he had them lift young Larry Rawson and bear him into the hotel, very gently, very tenderly. Twice the youth fainted; twice he recovered his senses and groaned with the agony before they put him on a bed on the first floor of the hotel. There keen hunting knives were put to hand. The boots, the clothes of the sick man were sliced from his body, and when that shell was removed and the doctor saw the lithe, powerful body and the great, arching chest of the stricken puncher, he nodded his approval.

"That young man will take a good deal of licking, and a good deal of killing," said he. "But—what the devil could that bullet have done to *avoid* killing him?"

And he went to work to save this man who refused to die. There were more nurses volunteering than could be used. And every moment more were arriving. The doctor established two sensible women. One was to see that his orders concerning food were carried out to the

letter. One was to see that the nursing instructions were carried out with a similar fidelity. And there were two active workers under each of these heads. So, under the direction of the doctor, Jackson Corners furnished a corps of six patient laborers to take care of Rawson.

They lodged him in a better room, so soon as he could be safely moved. On the next day the doctor located the bullet and took it from the thick muscles in the small of Larry Rawson's back.

"Now," said the doctor, "he is sure to die. Nothing can save him. That wound was enough to kill ten giants!"

But still Larry Rawson refused to die. He slept a great deal, and when pain grew too much for him, he opened his eyes, and cursed with an enormous violence and a fluency which astonished and shocked his poor nurses.

"Let him go on," said the doctor. "He helps himself that way, and if he can forget the pain by cursing it, I won't have to give him so much dope to relieve the torment. Let him be! He's doing very well!"

On the second day Doctor Chandler Marrow was forced to announce that he himself began to have some slight hopes. On the fourth day he declared that since the young devil had lived this long, he would be *surprised* if Larry Rawson died! And, on the fifth day, Larry Rawson opened his eyes and blinked at the ceiling with a perfectly clear mind working behind those eyes.

"Chief," said he to the doctor, "tell me in the first place what's become of Joe Hooker?"

The doctor shook his head. "You think about yourself," advised the doctor.

"What," exclaimed the wounded man in a louder voice, "has become of Joe Hooker?"

"Steady! Steady!" said Doctor Marrow. "Keep still and I'll tell you everything I know which is, simply, that since the sheriff and about twenty of the boys dived into the hills five days ago, we don't know what happened."

"The sheriff is after him, then?" asked Rawson.

"Of course. Like a bulldog."

"It's too bad," sighed the stricken man. "Does old Guernsey know that I'm not killed?"

"How could we send him news when we don't know where in the mountains to find him?"

"He's got to be found!" said Rawson through his gritted teeth. "Who has gone out to trail the sheriff?"

"Nobody that I know of."

"Tell them to get some one. They'll find money in my clothes to pay his expenses. Otherwise, the sheriff will catch up with Joe and Joe will never surrender till he's dead, and——"

"I see," murmured the doctor. "You want to save him for your own gun later on—you want to get laid on your back again? Well, son, the next time *would* be the end for you."

"Oh," muttered Rawson, "I don't know about that. But I've lain here thinking, all the time, and every time I think about Joe Hooker I understand better that I was wrong. A man that would stand up to another man the way that he stood up to me, ain't the sort that would shoot a fellow through the back. Am I right, doctor?"

"You're right, and darned right!" admitted the doctor heartily.

"Then get somebody on the trail to carry the good news about me to the sheriff—and let 'em tell the sheriff what I think about Joe. That tall, skinny guy is straight!"

"We'll do it," admitted the doctor. "We should have done it before. Because now it'll be a hard job to catch up with the lot of them. They've gone a long way into the mountains; and Hooker and young Red Hardwick are not the kind who stand still in one spot. very long."

"Hardwick? Good heavens, how does he come with Hooker?"

"Hush up. You've talked enough. I'll tell you the rest to-morrow."

And the other, with a submissive groan, closed his eyes.

CHAPTER X.

TREACHERY AFOOT.

FATE was still working into the hands of young Blackie Connell. In order to understand, we must go back to the day of the double shooting—the shooting which left Larry Rawson desperately wounded and much cared for, and Lew Bender dead and utterly unregarded.

But, in the meantime on that eventful day, Red Hardwick had continued to work over the gallant mare, Spitfire, until at last she allowed him to sit on her back and guide her gently and smoothly around the corral merely by the pressure of the rope against her neck. And he began to understand, now, that the reason she had fought against him was not really hatred, but simply a consuming fear of the damage that might come to her at the hands of this man if she submitted herself to him. And, the instant he came to understand that he was dealing with dread and not with malice, it seemed to the sweating, much-bruised Red, that he had opened a door to her inner nature with a key of magic. After that, he was able to do as he pleased. It needed only a great deal of gentleness of hand and of voice, and she responded soon enough.

Yes, and when he had dismounted, and Blackie appeared around the corner of the barn, the mare, starting at the sudden appearance of the stranger, jumped close to Red as though for protection. Blackie swore with surprise.

"She's eating out of your hand at last," said he. "I never thought that you'd do it, Red!"

"Neither did I," sighed Red, while he stroked her sleek neck. "But she's worth the trouble, eh?"

"She's a beauty. Red, I came out to tell you something else."

"Well, Blackie, what's the bad news now?"

"You've guessed right. It's bad news, and very bad news. That old fool, Mrs. Munding——"

"I know her. She's the one who sent for the sheriff when we stole her watermelons——"

"That's the one. She showed up today—left about five minutes ago—with a long yarn about some stuff that she'd heard in town—about you, Red, going around borrowing a lot of money because you——"

"Where the devil did she hear that?"

"I don't know. Would Hooker or Jenkins tell?"

"Never in a thousand years! It was some one else. Who could it have been?"

"I can't guess. You may have been overheard by some one talking to Joe or Si."

"That must be it."

"The worst of it is that they hitch another rotten thing up with the money. They say that you've gotten into trouble and that you had to get the money or go to jail."

"The devil! How does the old man take it?"

"Connell is crazy. He's walking up and down the house swearing that it's a lie—but if it's true—he'll throw you out of the house and never look at you again!"

Red bit his lip and turned white.

Blackie hastened to add: "Of course if it comes to a pinch, I'll step in and confess everything."

"Only in the worst sort of a pinch," said Red. "But I love the old man, Blackie. It would break my heart to fall out with him completely."

"You love him, and I suppose you don't care a rap about his money?" sug-

gested Blackie dryly. "Well, come along with me. He sent me out here for you. He's pretty hot, Red! Think up something as you go along!"

"I've got to admit borrowing the money, I suppose," said Red.

"I don't see why."

"Because I could not lie well enough about that to get away with it. I'll tell him it was for a friend—I've got to tell him something like that."

"Red, he'll corner you."

"You trust me," said Red. "I'll hold out to the last ditch. I didn't go through all the trouble for you yesterday, Blackie, for the sake of turning you down to-day."

They went back to the house in a strained silence. And at the door they looked in on Mr. and Mrs. Andy Connell in the kitchen—she fussing vaguely at some dish of fruit which was stewing on the stove—Andy himself in his shirt sleeves seated behind the table with his elbows resting upon it, his thin, silver hair bristling up in every direction to tell of how his fingers had been thrust through that hair time and again in his excitement. His face, in which age appeared in the drooping eyelids, was brightly flushed. And he stretched out both his calloused hands to Red.

"Red," said he, "Blackie has told me the whole lying yarn. Now you tell me the truth!"

Red hesitated only an instant. "I don't know how a lie like that could have started," said he.

"It's all just malicious lyin', ain't it?" cried old Andy Connell eagerly.

"It's a lie and a big lie, all right," said Red. "I suppose somebody started it for a joke."

"I knew it!" cried Andy Connell, sinking back in the chair. "Oh, Red, if I'd a thought that you done a thing like that—the sort of a crime that they tell about—so's you didn't have the nerve to come to *me* and ask for help, but had to borrow from your friends—I'd of plumb died, Red, if anything like that had happened!"

Blackie flashed a glance of relief at Red, as much as to say: "It's over, Red, and thank Heaven for it!"

But here Mrs. Connell, who did not appear so well pleased with the quiet termination of the affair, said gloomily: "Seems to me, Andy, that it's mighty queer that there should be such a lot of smoke where there ain't no fire at all!"

"You women," said her husband sternly, "hate Red so's you can't help but wish him a harm. But I tell you that that sort of a thing ain't in him."

Here she turned upon Red. "Red Hardwick!" cried she. "Can you say that you didn't borrow any money from Si Jenkins and Joe Hooker—to say nothing of any others?"

The denial came up in his throat and stuck there.

He had to admit: "I got some money from them."

Andy Connell was struck gray by the admission, and Blackie winced.

"You *did* get money!" cried Mrs. Connell. "I told you that there was fire behind all of that smoke!"

"Red, you got money for what?" asked Andy Connell in a shaken voice. "How much money did you get?"

"I got—quite a bit!"

"You got quite a bit?" echoed the miner. "How much!"

"Thirteen hundred dollars," said Red, his head falling.

"Thirteen hundred dollars!" shouted Connell. "For what? For what could you want a—a fortune like that?"

"For a friend," gasped out Red, turning whiter as he saw the ridiculous imputation.

"For a friend!" repeated Mrs. Connell, and broke into shrill laughter. "Red, don't talk like a fool. If you're gunna tell a lie, tell a good lie!"

Andy Connell had hurried around the table and now stood before the boy, his face working with a great emotion.

"Red," he said, "for Heaven's sake tell me the truth! You know what you mean to me, Red. You know that what I got I hold more for you than I do for myself. I ain't wanted you to get the habit of a spendthrift. That's the only reason I don't give you fifty thousand a year to spend! That's the only reason, Red. Will you believe me? And if you had a friend that was in a hole, why didn't you come to me and tell me who he was and what he wanted? Wouldn't I of give the money to you as quick as a wink? Red, come out and tell me the straight of everything."

Red cast a desperate glance at Blackie, but the latter studiously avoided the appeal.

"Answer up," begged Connell. "A straight answer is the answer that comes the quickest."

"There's nothing that I can say," murmured Red. "Except—if you had known for whom I wanted the money, it would have made you angrier than to have me ask it for myself!"

Mrs. Connell laughed again. "That's likely," said she, sneering broadly.

"Red," said Connell, with a flash of open anger, "who was the man? Could it have been Blackie, here?"

Red started to speak a denial, but he could not make the words come.

"Blackie!" shouted Connell. "By the heavens, I might of knowed——"

But, as he himself faced the youngster, he found that his suspicions were brought to a sudden halt. For the face of Blackie was the face of a master actor. Only astonishment appeared there at the first, and then astonishment was supplanted by bewilderment, by anger, by injured virtue.

At last he said sadly: "Red, why do you stick a knife in me, when I haven't harmed you?"

"Oh, the wicked young devil!" exclaimed Mrs. Connell.

But in Red, rage and wonder took the very face of guilt. For he grew white, and his lips trembled, and his eyes started from his head.

"Guilty!" groaned Andy Connell. "Oh, Red—Red, if you got anything to say—if you got any word to speak, speak it now!"

"Blackie!" cried Red in his agony.

"I'll do what I can," said Blackie. And he caught the hand of Andy Connell.

Andy Connell brushed him away.

"I always told you!" cried Mrs. Connell. "I always told you that Blackie would come out on top! I always told you that Red was a snake! I hope you'll listen to me once in a while after this! Poor Blackie, he's all broke up over the thing!"

Blackie had sunk into a chair and dropped his face in both his hands, as though, indeed, the consummate wickedness of his foster brother was more than he could endure.

"You got nothing else to say, then?" cried Andy Connell.

And Red could only be silent, wondering how God permitted such wrong on the wretched earth.

He finished his musing very briefly. "I got nothing to say," he admitted.

"Get out of the house—out of my sight! And God forgive me for havin' raised up a snake in the place of a man!"

So Red, with one wild glance around him, ran stumbling through the doorway and, still stumbling, across the open toward the barn; and behind him, from the door, the wild, broken voice of Andy Connell followed him with curses.

It was the end of the world, the downfall of all right, the kingdom of wrong!

CHAPTER XI.

RED STICKS.

HE would take with him, he determined, only those things which were his of his own right and not the gift of Andy Connell. So he hurried first to

the shed where he had left his rifle and revolver, after Joe Hooker's last lesson in marksmanship of that morning. There he belted them on. Then he went to the barn and took the saddle which he had won at the bucking contest two summers before. So he continued to the corral where Spitfire remained by herself—and behold! the bright-eyed mare came up to him uncalled, unpersuaded, and began to sniff at the burden of leather and of iron which he carried.

Yes, she stood even without a rope on her neck while he placed that saddle on her back.

"It's my luck!" said Red gloomily to himself. "When I've lost everything else, the horse comes to me. God bless her!"

When she felt the bite of the cinches, she snapped her head around and laid hold on his arm; but at the first word she relaxed her grip. So he completed the saddling and raised himself gently and settled in the saddle. She went off at a gentle trot with pricking ears like the best trained saddle horse in the world!

Indeed, it seemed like a stroke of fate that she should have become so suddenly manageable. She went off through the hills with her head in the air and her gait as light as blown foam across the trails. The sullen pain in the heart of Red began to lessen. For it seemed to him, after all, that this was the life for which he was intended—a lonely life, unshielded by friends or money from the country itself, with one or two bosom companions—like Joe Hooker!

And as for work, why not begin as a cow-puncher, and then work, perhaps, into an interest in some small ranch, and all that he owned have as the product of the work of his own hands, while Blackie reveled in the unearned millions which he would inherit from old Andy Connell. It was a prospect which satisfied Red Hardwick, and as he rode, he wondered that such a solution had never come into his mind before. He had looked forward to the inheritance from Andy Connell as a necessary thing—a thing without which he could hardly live. Now that the blow had fallen, he felt that he was above being affected by it. The concern of it was all removed from him.

So thought Red Hardwick as he sent Spitfire spinning along the crest of a narrow ridge, and then flew her down the easy slope beyond. He had worked, gradually, up into the mountains, and now he headed instinctively toward a place where he and Joe Hooker had often ridden. It was a dry valley several miles in length, with steep walls on either side, but these walls were carved away on both hands by narrow ravines. There were three ravines on either side, running at a leisurely angle up from the floor of the valley. Joe Hooker had often pointed out that valley as a place where a man should ride if he were pursued by numbers.

"Because," Joe had said, "the whole floor of the valley is covered with flint so hard that it won't show the dent of a horse's hoof, and once you get into the valley, you can ride straight through it—it's the easiest way through the heart of the hills—or else you can turn to one side or the other, three chances on one side and three chances on the other. Why, man, you got seven things to do, and the boys after you would have seven things to think about!"

They had often ridden into the valley and taken cognizance of its possibilities. And now Red Hardwick let his mare saunter gently toward the place—gently, until he saw over the rim of a western hill the shadow of a flying horseman printed for an instant against the sky and then dipping down the nearer slope. He did not need to look twice. Even at that distance, he knew the splendid gray of Joe Hooker; even at that distance, he knew the singular seat of Joe Hooker

in the saddle, with a way of twisting his right shoulder far forward, riding slanting. He loosed the reins of Spitfire and she flew on toward the mouth of the black valley. A shout and a wave of the hand made the approaching rider take note of him, and as he took note, a gun winked into the hand of Hooker.

It told Red what from the speed of the horse and the desperate earnestness of the rider, he had been able to guess before. Joe Hooker had at last "kicked over the traces" and now he was flying for his life.

At the very entrance of the valley their horses met, and Red shouted:

"What's up, Joe?"

"Hell fire!" answered Joe, and waved behind him.

They were already in view. Over the crest of the hill where Hooker had ridden, a half dozen riders came pouring, and now, at a distance behind, still others. Hooker and Red pushed their own horses into the mouth of the valley and out of sight.

"Take my horse, Joe!" begged Red. "Take my horse. I'll tell them that you held me up and made me give it to you."

"I'll live or die with the gray," answered Hooker tersely.

"But with you *on* the gray, Joe, what's let them keep so close?"

"When they got to Mooney's, they found that he had his horses all bunched in his corrals, ready for a try at selling them. They hopped into those corrals and picked out the best of the lot—and you know that Mooney has some good nags. So they've got fresh horseflesh under them and they're driving me into the ground!"

"Joe, which way'll you turn?"

"This way, maybe!" snarled out Joe savagely, and he swung about in his saddle and stared behind him, his rifle held at the ready.

He continued: "You get out of this, kid. This is my own little job. Vamoose!"

"I'll stick with you, Joe," said Red with emotion, "until you sink a bullet in me. But don't use the rifle, Joe. Don't use it until they have you cornered. What in the world has happened?"

"A fool came along begging me to kill him. And at last I done it."

"Who?"

"Young Larry Rawson."

"The devil! He's a fine fellow, Joe."

"He was fine, maybe. But he ain't now. I never done a thing that I hated worse. But the fool kid drove me back and drove me back. I'd of had to take water before all of Jackson Corners to keep away from a fight with him! Here!"

As he spoke, he swung the gray—which was now almost black with running sweat—into the throat of a gully.

"Wrong, wrong!" cried out Red. "They expect you to head south toward the border. Take the other side of the valley and ride north——"

"You're right, kid. By the heavens, you're right!"

And Joe Hooker swung the gray squarely about and spurred it cruelly across the volcanic floor of the valley and into the mouth of a ravine on the opposite side. Red Hardwick, flying half a stride behind him, thought that he saw the head of the pursuit come into view at the same moment. But he could not be sure.

In another instant they had turned around the first shoulder of the twisting ravine and were again lost from the sight of the pursuers. Here Joe Hooker flung himself from his horse and led it forward. He commanded Red to do the same thing.

"Because if they hear us," said Hooker, "it's the same as if they saw us—and a horse makes twice as much noise with its feet with a man on its back."

Out of the main floor of the valley behind them they heard a turmoil of shouting, all the voices sounding dream-like in distance, but they went plodding steadily on, looking at each other with big eyes, now and then, but saying nothing, as if merely a whisper might betray them. And then, right behind them, filling the narrow pass with thunder, they heard the roar of the hoofs of galloping horses!

"They've found us, Joe!" cried Red. And he caught his mare by the bridle, preparatory to swinging onto her back.

The lean hand of Joe Hooker caught and held him.

"Maybe they've found our trail—maybe they ain't. Maybe they're just doing a little exploring. Wait and see!"

He turned and rested the rifle in the crook of his arm. Up the ravine, the noise of the pursuit washed like a great wave that crowds a shoaling beach with thunder and pushes far up a rocky inlet. It stormed almost upon them—and then paused. There was only a single elbow bend of the ravine between them and the danger.

"I'll be darned," said one, "if I go another step. We're killing our horses running up mountainsides; and the sheriff ought to have better sense. Besides, Hooker ain't here. He rode right straight through the valley. I think I had a peek at him as he turned out at the end of the valley."

"He wasn't that far ahead. He couldn't have got to the end of the valley before we seen him."

"He has a fast hoss under him."

"But his hoss is spent. Let's go a ways farther up this draw——"

"Not a step. I'm not going to kill my hoss for the sheriff."

"Stay where you are, then. Come on boys. We'll have a look at——"

"He ain't up this way," answered another voice. "There ain't no sign——"

"He wouldn't leave none on rock as hard as this here."

"I'm through. Come on back, Billy. Unless you want to try him by yourself!"

There was a protesting oath from Billy; then the sound of the horses receded. And Red drew a long breath as he saw the ready rifle dropped from the arm of Joe Hooker.

"That," said Joe, "is the closest I ever come to killing, and if I'd had to shoot——"

"Whether you drove them back or not, it would have been the end of you!"

"Unless I could have gotten clean out of the country," admitted Hooker. "This Guernsey is a bulldog. He's gunna give me trouble! And now, Red, you nearly got in the same hornet's nest with me. Hit the back trail, kid!"

"Not in a thousand years!" said Red.

CHAPTER XII.

PURSUIT.

THEY drifted over the crest of the hills slowly, making north. And still Joe Hooker walked at the side of his gray horse, with the cinches loosened.

"Suppose that they rush you—the whole gang of them?" suggested Red anxiously.

"Look at Jim," said Hooker. "Look at Jim Dandy. He ain't blowing his head off any more. He ain't trailin' his feet. He's pickin' his head up a mite. Well, old son, if they do sight me and rush me, I don't mind tellin' you that I'll have time to hop into the saddle and then—jest blow away from 'em, son! They've give me a bad time with their fresh hosses. But now I'm ready to run with the best of 'em! Another fifteen minutes and Jim will be all blowed out and about as good as ever. But boy, boy, how they come hoppin' over the hills after me! I thought that I'd never see that old valley, and if I did, I thought that they'd be so close onto my heels that I wouldn't have a chance

to dodge and hide! It was a sort of a jumpy time. But you, Red, what the devil brings you out here, makin' a fool of yourself hangin' around with a man-killer like me?"

To him, Red told the story of his loss of a home, told it all as briefly as it could be crammed into terse words.

"Only," said Joe Hooker, "I want to know if what you said was the truth. *Did* you go around and raise that money for a friend?"

"On my word."

"What friend?"

"Blackie."

Joe Hooker gasped.

"You really mean it, Red? You really mean that you *did* give that money to the sneaking, double-tongued, poison-carryin' son of a gun, Blackie?"

"I did," said Red.

"Then," said Joe Hooker, after a moment of profane comment, "you deserve everything that's coming to you!"

"I do," said Red, "and I know it! Look, Joe, they're coming!"

Sheriff Sid Guernsey had started every man of his lot cutting around the valley to find sign of the fugitive, and now the sign had been found and the whole posse came humming over the hills after the gun fighter. But Joe Hooker's prophecy was more than borne out. He had time to draw the cinches tight, swing into the saddle, and when the gray horse started away, it was with a light and easy stride that dropped the posse far and farther behind every instant.

In a scant hour the pursuit had disappeared from the horizon. There, in a rocky tract between two hills, Joe Hooker paused to construct a trail puzzle that would have troubled the keen wits of a grizzly bear. Then he went on again, and Red with him, into the yellow light of the end of the day, with the sun hanging low on their left hand.

The sun had turned crimson and squatted on top of a western peak when they came in sight of a solitary man moving before them down the heart of a shallow valley. He was not walking, but striking out at a steady dog trot.

"A Mexican," said Joe Hooker at once. "And a Mexican will do me no harm. He may give me news that I want to know."

So they freshened the pace of their horses and hurried on at a round canter. When the pedestrian, however, heard the sound of the hoofs behind him, he turned, and then started off like a rabbit toward the nearest brush. He was far too late for an escape, however.

"He's been up to some deviltry," shouted Joe to Red. "That makes him meat for us!"

When they came closer, the other suddenly whirled and flung himself flat along the ground, with a rifle pitched into the hollow of his shoulder.

"Pull up, Red!" shouted Hooker. "Pull up, or the fool will do us some harm!"

He set the example, and at the same time raised his right hand high above his head in token of amity.

A sharp voice cautioned them: "Who are you, amigos? Why have you followed me?"

"I always follow a man that runs," answered Joe Hooker. "I'm Joe Hooker; does that mean anything to you? I'm not the sheriff, and I'm not one of the sheriff's men. Does that mean anything more?"

The Mexican arose, still with his rifle ready. "Señor," said he, "my horse has broken his leg in a prairie dog's hole. Never before have I needed a friend so greatly. If you will help me, señor, God will bless you, and I have fifteen dollars to pay you for your trouble!"

"This poor devil," said Hooker aside to Red, "is in the same boat with me." He added, aloud, as he let his gray horse work nearer: "What trouble have you dropped into, amigo?"

"I?" said the Mexican. "I, señor, am in no trouble at all, if you please."

Joe Hooker merely grinned at him. "Let's tell the truth to one another," said he, "because we may need one another before we're through with the next day. You have no horse; we have two horses; and if you prove yourself of the right stuff, you take it with my word that we will not leave you in the lurch. I will begin. I'm Joe Hooker, and the reason I'm spending the night in the hills instead of in Jackson Corners is because there is a dead man in that town, and the sheriff wants me."

The Mexican started violently and turned not white, because the color of his skin forbade such a change, but a dingy yellow.

"You, too, señor?" he could not help exclaiming.

"The devil!" exclaimed Hooker. "Have you done the same thing?"

"No——" began the Mexican. and then changed his mind in mid speech. "Señor, I shall trust you. There is indeed a dead man behind me. I have killed Lew Bender by the hotel."

"This," said Joe Hooker, "is getting sort of wonderful. That was the gun shot that made poor Larry Rawson jump pretty nigh out of his skin, and then like a young fool pull his gun on me! And you're the bird that was in the trees doing the shooting?"

"There were two shots, señor!" cried the Mexican. "I stood before him face to face. It was fair fight. Only by so much"—and he held up his hand, pinching thumb and forefinger close together—"only by so much my bullet arrived first and his bullet twitched aside and lifted the hair by my forehead."

He paused and added solemnly: "I swear to the high God, señor, that it was done in the fairest fight. I could not fight my own brother more fairly. Besides, I had a great command to kill him. I tell you, señor, that a man as good as an angel from heaven came to me and told me to kill him. Otherwise, what profit was it to me? Did I rob him? I did not! I did not take so much as the gun which had dropped from his hand. But as he fell, so I left him! I swear it, señor!"

"This is all the truth, amigo," answered Joe Hooker gently. "Very well. Here we are, the pair of us, having dropped our men. The sheriff is after me; he will be after you, too, in time. And so we'll team it, eh?"

"Alas, Señor Hooker, I have no horse!"

"We'll make the first march without a horse and trust to God to get us a nag to-morrow to fit you out. What is your name?"

"My name is José Ridal."

"Ridal, we know one another." He held out his hand and closed it upon the hand of the Mexican. Then Red Hardwick was called up and introduced.

"This," said Hooker, "is an old friend who has lost his home, and he has thrown in his luck with mine—like a fool kid!"

José Ridal acknowledge the introduction with a broad grin. "Only," said he, "I cannot tell why you will choose to help a man not known to you, like myself, señor!"

"Listen to me," answered Joe Hooker, while Red listened with a peculiar interest: "I've been around the world, and now when I see a man that I can cotton to, I know his face right off. The way that I know yours, José. You'd never down a pal or knife a friend. I could trust you, José."

José smiled. "This is all very well," said he. "Now, my friend, help me today and you will find that I shall be able to help you to-morrow!"

So they struck off up the valley, and it was some time before Red Hardwick had a chance to speak with Joe Hooker apart. Then he said:

"Why do you do it, Joe? If Guernsey gets on your trail again, as he's apt

to, we're all lost, because one horse will have to carry double!"

"I don't know," admitted Joe Hooker. "But when I saw the poor devil stumbling along on foot, my heart went out to him, and I follow my heart, Red. It's the only way that I know how to live and be happy, no matter what comes!"

It seemed a sufficiently mysterious thing to Red, but he made no answer.

They kept on well into the dark, until the limping of the Mexican forced them to make a halt. He was footsore from his labors of that day, and while he washed and bound up his feet in rags at a little brook that they met, the other two made the camp and cut down young boughs of pine and fir to make the three beds. They did not risk a fire, of course. And there was no food. But all three had gone hungry before this day. So they drew up their belts another notch, smoked a final cigarette—for a good-night smoke is the cure of all evils—and then rolled into their fragrant beds. And, in an instant, they were sound asleep.

Or at least, they were lost in sleep as sound as that which ever comes to hunted men. Midnight passed, and the sky was already gray when Joe Hooker sat up and hissed softly; and the other two as they opened their eyes heard him say: "We have the luck of the devil himself! They are coming, pals! They must have camped higher up on this same brook!"

CHAPTER XIII.

CORNERED.

TWICE, as they flung the saddles on the horses, the eyes of José Ridal darted askance at the shrubbery near by, as though he considered finding shelter there. But each glance must have made him see the folly of such a hope. For it was a ghost of a shelter. It made hardly more than a thin mist on the hillside, and a man's body could not be sheltered there from the most casual glance.

He turned his attention with a redoubled interest to the saddling of the horses, which was completed in jig time. Then the three started down the hillside, the horses walking, even though the riders were hungry for speed—walking while the noise of the man hunters grew louder and bolder behind them every moment. But, as they worked over the sandy ground beside the brook, Joe Hooker said: "If we can get out of sight, they ain't so apt to foller our trail. They know that I got one more man with me, and they'll be looking for the trail of two horses, not for two horses and a man on foot beside 'em."

They were never to know what held the posse such an unconscionable time behind the heads of the hills; but at any rate they were able presently to turn unseen into the shallow hiding of the next hollow. Here José Ridal was taken up on the stirrup and then behind the cantle of Joe Hooker's saddle, and the horses broke away, but not at a burning gallop.

"We need their wind! We need their wind!" called Hooker after Red Hardwick. "Let 'em take it easy!"

So they dropped to a sharp trot, Jim Dandy flattening his ears at the double labor which he was compelled to do.

And they had covered much ground when, behind them, they heard a far-off single shout, followed by an outcry like the opening of a pack of hounds.

"They've got more sense than I thought," declared Joe Hooker. "They figger that this *is* our trail. And here they come. Step up, Jim Dandy! Come along, boy!"

Jim Dandy answered with a valiant effort and they spun down the hollow at a round gallop, with the valiant gray seeming to run as lightly as though he had not more than four hundred pounds of man and saddle on his back. When

Red offered to take the Mexican on his horse in turn, Joe Hooker shook his head.

"I ain't done my share yet," said he.

They came to the course of a shallow little stream twisting among the hills like a writhing snake.

"Angle your hoss downstream," said Joe to Red, and started the gray in as though he intended to follow down the current. Instead, he wheeled the gray in the narrow sweep of water and began to rush him up the water. Red followed as a matter of course.

There was hardly more than a foot of water; the current was not fast, and the bed of the stream was well compacted, heavy gravel, so that even Jim Dandy, with his double load could trot through the stream. Now, behind them, the rapid muttering of the hoofs of galloping horses came nearer, and Red, as the rear guard, unlimbered his rifle.

It is a hard thing to say of Red, but the truth is that had the best and the most law-abiding man in the county appeared at that moment on the trail, he would have tried a fair shot at the worthy with hardly more compunction than he would have used in drawing a bead at a tree squirrel. But following the course of the water, they had twisted out of sight of the floor of the hollow before one of the pursuit appeared. Joe Hooker then consented that Red should take José Ridal up behind the cantle of the mare, and they rode out of the stream and cantered down its farther bank.

Spitfire at first was inclined to pitch at this new incubus which had been placed upon her back, but she settled down almost at once, so much difference had a single day of hard riding made in her training. She submitted to voice and hand and went along smoothly enough, and more strongly than even Jim Dandy.

"You see," said Joe Hooker, watching her action with an eye of admiration, "what a difference it makes when they're allowed to grow up free—and wild? She'd be a spindly thing if she'd been caught up and worked from her third year."

But, in the meantime, the voice of the Mexican was at the ear of Red Hardwick.

"Señor, it is I who will carry you both to your deaths. I am not worthy! See, *amigo mio,* there are many crimes behind me. I am not worthy that two good men should risk themselves for me. Let me jump down. I shall run up that hillside and try to hide among the rocks."

"There are no rocks there big enough to hide a chipmunk," said Red calmly. "Stay with us, Ridal. Have we complained of you yet?"

There was a devout burst of Spanish from the lips of José Ridal, and Red knew that the fellow was offering up a prayer to his special saint for the sake of the two "gringos" who had rescued him.

They put such a stretch of ground behind them, before poor Sheriff Guernsey was able to decipher the simple little trail puzzle, that they did not see the sheriff's men again that day, the second day of the pursuit. That night they came to a ranch house in the hills—a tumble-down shack inhabited by an old man and his son.

"Look here," said Joe Hooker, as he appeared at the door, "I'm Joe Hooker; d'you know me?"

The old man merely winced; but his son resolutely reached for a rifle which hung on the wall. He got his hand to it, but he also found the steady revolver of Joe Hooker looking him in the eye, so his arm fell to his side again.

"You've got a good-looking brown gelding in the corral," said Joe. "What's the price of it?"

"That's a seventy-five-dollar hoss," said the old rancher.

"It's too high a price," said Joe

Hooker, "because that's just a mustang. But I'm gunna give you a hundred. The extra change will buy us a meal from you. Eh?"

At this the old chap squinted sharply at him.

"Are you gunna have me set down as the hired man of a crook and a man-killer?" he asked. "It ain't in me, Hooker—no matter what you and your two pals may do to me and me boy!"

"Who would know," said Hooker, "that we gave you any hire? You can tell them that we robbed you of a hoss and that we stuck you up and made you cook us a meal."

"That ain't so bad," admitted the veteran. "Come in and rest your feet, boys. I'll have you a snack fixed up in a jiffy. Tom, go out and fetch in the brown. Maybe you'd want a saddle for that hoss?"

"We would."

"Throw Josh Curry's saddle on the brown."

"How much will that cost us?"

"Nothin'! I'm makin' enough money off you the way it is. Josh is dead, you see. And his saddle by rights is dead too. But it's a place to set in, and it's got stirrups for your feet. It's better'n nothin'. Hop along, Tom!"

"Shall I go with him?" whispered Red to Joe.

"Not a step!" answered Joe from the corner of his mouth. "These fellers are white, and they know the right white-man's ways. They won't double cross us!"

There they ate of the best that the house could provide. The money was counted into the hand of the old cattleman. Tom brought in the brown gelding, and they departed with a ring of good wishes behind them.

The third day they crossed the divide of the range and dropped onto the northeastern side; they rose for the fourth morning with a feeling that safety was certainly in their grasp at last—and found that Ridal's brown gelding had gone lame!

The Mexican turned gray. "The first," said he, "was bad luck. But when a man is struck down twice, what shall I call it? It is the hand of God, my friends. And I am no better than a dead man, for they shall never take me alive!"

"You talk like a fool!" Joe Hooker told him bluntly. "Walk the gelding around a little. He's only cold and stiff."

But exercise made no difference. The gelding was hopelessly gone. They left him to graze as he would, and they started on again as they had done in the first place, with the two on horseback, and José Ridal striding at the side. But all the heart was gone from him now.

"They will find us! They will find us!" he repeated. "God has spoken against us, friends, and there is no escape—leave José Ridal behind you, for there is a curse on him!"

They paid no attention to those lamentations, however, but in the late evening of the fourth day, as they looked about them for a proper place to camp and started toward the mouth of a narrow, wooded ravine, José Ridal stumbled and fell—and before he struck the ground the clangor of rifles was in the ears of the two riders.

Many a time Red Hardwick had leaned from his saddle and scooped the handkerchief from the ground. He leaned now, without changing the stride of his trotting horse, and scooped up the Mexican. Hot blood spurted across his hand and his arm as he did so. But he brought Ridal safely across the pommel of his saddle. A deep groan from José gave promise that the Mexican was not yet dead. And so, with Hooker ahead, showing the way, they raced up the slope of the hill on their left. They hardly had reached its crest, where a little deserted shack stood, a tumble-down tiny ruin, than a crackle of gun

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rose from the valley beyond, and they saw half a dozen horsemen rushing up toward them.

There was nothing else to be done. They whirled back to the shack. José was dragged inside it; and Joe Hooker, with a shout and a wave of his arms, frightened their horses away down the opposite slope.

"Because," said he, "it's a lot better that the sheriff should have 'em than that they should get filled full of lead!"

There was no danger of a charge. On all sides they heard the jubilant shouting of the posse. And, afterward, they could hear the sharp voice of the sheriff giving his orders.

"He's got forty men with him! He's travelin' with a whole army!" said Joe Hooker sadly.

"Here," said Red. "Look at José!"

There was no need of even such skill as Joe possessed. It was too plain that José was a dying man.

CHAPTER XIV.

WITHIN AN ACE OF BEING DEAD.

BUT through that night, Ridal refused to die. He clung stubbornly to his life. They had made a little torch of pine wood and screened it so that the light fell upon Ridal. But still it gave no advantage to those who watched without and who, from time to time, pumped a rifle bullet through the shack by way of keeping the inhabitants awake, one might have said.

"There are two agonies upon me, friends," said José faintly. "The first is that I have brought you to such an end because I am cursed. And the next is that I must die by candlelight. Who knows," he added, with a break of feverish superstition and a wild rolling of his eyes, "who knows if I might not find the way to heaven under the light of the sun. But this candlelight——"

The pine torch was flaring high, and the flood of yellow light was falling directly upon the face of José, but so dulled were his eyes that he seemed to see only a glimmer.

They had made the big bandage around his body as well as they were able; but still the blood speeded through the cloth.

"Do you see?" said José to them faintly. "Life is a well of water. But mine is broken, and the water is running out swiftly!"

Red Hardwick could endure no more. He jumped up and left the cabin and, from the brink of the hill, he looked down. It was a pleasant picture, that picture of the outer night.

Sheriff Guernsey had ringed the hill on which the cabin stood with little camp fires—a dozen, perhaps, in all. They cast a light from one point of the circle to the next and threw long, tossing shadows up the slope. In the rocks behind the fire, securely fortified as in so many nests, were the men of the posse, two or more to every fire, with rifles constantly leveled and revolvers always at hand.

Sheriff Guernsey would not allow sleepiness to overcome his men. He ordered that at each fire one man should be resting—sleeping if he could. The other man or men were to keep awake and watch. And, in order to make sure that the watchfulness should not lag, he had ordered three men to be constantly crawling about from post to post, with brandy and food. Such was the wisdom of Guernsey, and a darting squirrel could not have succeeded in forcing its way through the line of those fires. When the morning came, it would be a simple thing to riddle that wretched little shack with rifle fire and drive out or kill the fugitives. The game was entirely in his hand, and the sheriff knew it.

So did Red, as he lay on his belly on the cold hillside and studied the scene. And what he did not know of the sheriff's orders, he could guess by

the regular distribution of the fires and the evenness with which they were fed with fuel. It was very likely, he thought, that they would follow the outbound footsteps of José very soon.

He called loudly: "Guernsey! Sid Guernsey!"

A rifle spoke in answer, and the bullet ripped up the ground before him and cast a shower of sand into his face.

"Stop that shooting!" barked the shrill voice of Guernsey.

"My finger done it, not me," said the guilty man.

"What you want?" called Guernsey.

"I want to come down and talk to you."

"Come down, then," said Guernsey. "You'll go back safe enough. But stop in front of the fires. Don't try to break through the line. You'll be covered."

Red went down and stood exactly in front of the fires. A shadow among shadows, Guernsey arose from the rocks beyond.

"Well, Red," he said, "you've got yourself into good company, and you been givin' comfort and help to them that the law wants. I dunno how many years in jail you'll get—even if you give yourself up now. I suppose that's what you come down for?"

"You suppose wrong. We got a dying man up in the shack."

"Hooker?"

"No, Ridal."

"The devil; what's he to me?"

"Nothing, I suppose. Is there a doctor in the lot of you?"

"Speak up, boys," called Guernsey. "Is there a doctor among us? No," he added after pausing a moment for a reply, "there ain't. But what d'you want?"

"Somebody who can make the Mexican comfortable while he dies. There's not much hope for him."

Guernsey paused again. "It would be a fool thing for me to come myself. But I got a doctoring kit. And—Red, I'll come."

There was a chorus of protest from the posse—warnings that Guernsey would be taken and held for their own safety by the fugitives if he went up to the cabin. But Guernsey scoffed their warnings aside.

"I know Hooker better than that," said he. "And I know Red. They ain't rats!"

And up the hill he went at the side of Red Hardwick.

They found José Ridal fallen into a weak calm, his face haggard and his eyes closed and sunken. Joe Hooker, at the side of the dying man, acknowledged the presence of the sheriff by a nod only. And Guernsey set about examining the wound. He shook his head at once, drew out a brandy flask, and gave Ridal a stiff draw.

"There ain't nothing that can be done," said he. "He's drifting out fast!"

Under the stimulus, Ridal opened his wild eyes and looked vaguely at them.

"Who is this?" said he huskily to Guernsey. "Is it not my father's cousin? Are you not Pedro Gonzales, the priest?"

"I am," said Guernsey calmly.

"That is good," sighed Ridal. "As for my own soul, it is lost and can never be saved, father. But my two friends—this Señor Hardwick and this Señor Hooker, have risked their lives for my life. Do you hear me, father? Pray for them. Pray them into heaven!"

"Well," muttered Guernsey. "What is your own crime, José?" he asked in good Spanish.

"I killed a man like a rat. His name is Bender. But that is not all!"

"Did you kill him for his money, José?"

"I did not touch his purse," said the dying man. "I killed him for the sake

of a friend. A friend asked me to take him out of his way, and I killed him. Before this man, this Bender fought with me, I heard him tell the truth. He had come to get much money from Señor Lewis Connell."

"Ah?" said the sheriff.

"Because of that, Señor Connell wished him dead. And I killed him, father. But that is not the sin which damns me—that is——" His eyes roved eagerly. "Is that light beyond the windows the sunrise, father?" He pointed to the flickering lights from the camp fires which showed against the panes of glass.

"It's the sunrise," answered Joe Hooker, understanding.

"I thank God," said José Ridal. "I could not die in the dark of the night. Amigo——" said he to Joe Hooker, and as he laid his hand on the arm of the cow-puncher, he stiffened, choked, and looked up to the roof with sightless eyes. He was dead.

The sheriff himself closed those horrible, open eyes and laid a blanket over the form of the dead man. Then he said to Red: "What is this stuff about Blackie?"

"I don't know," said Red.

"However," said the sheriff, "it'll bear looking into. Red, I ask you now for the last time: D'you stick here with Joe until the fighting starts, or do you come along with me?"

"You go along with him," insisted Hooker.

"I stick here, and that's final," said Red.

"Red," began Hooker, "if you——"

"Persuading," said the sheriff, "will do no good. He's set in his mind."

And he left the cabin unhindered and went down the slope to the circle of fires. There, as he sat huddled inside a blanket he was heard to say: "Did you ever set a trap for a skunk and get a lion?"

But after that he did not speak again until the night was old and the gray of the dawn began, first as a chill stir in the air, and then a sudden blackening of the eastern mountains, so that they seemed to swallow half the sky, and finally a thin rim of gray along the tops of the peaks. Still it was not time to begin the shooting which must finish Hooker and his companion. And even when the sky had turned to rose, the sheriff was not yet ready.

It was at this time that some one announced a horseman headed toward them and they saw a rider hurrying a tired horse over the last hill. It was a young puncher from a neighboring town, his horse covered with lather.

"Is Guernsey here?" he asked.

"I'm Guernsey," said the sheriff.

The messenger slipped from his horse. "I see," he nodded, "and Hooker is up yonder, trapped?"

"He is," grinned the sheriff.

"Well," said the other, "open the trap and let him out. You've done a lot of riding for nothing!"

"Riding for nothing?" shouted Sid Guernsey.

"Larry Rawson is alive!" explained the other.

There was a muttering exclamation from the crowd.

"The telegraph was chattering last night," said the messenger. "When they found that you'd passed through the town yesterday, they burned up the wire telling us that Rawson is alive and that he's sure to get well, and that he ain't pressing no charges against Hooker. He says that it was a fair fight—and that he started the fighting. Hooker shot in self-defense!"

The sheriff stood like one stunned. And then he struck a hand against his face.

"Now," said he, "I got something to thank God for, which is something I thought that Hooker would never give me! Go call him down; he's come within an ace of bein' a dead man!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE INHERITANCE OF RED.

MRS. CONNELL had become Blackie's chief adviser. And when he pointed out to her that Andy seemed less fond of him than ever, since Red had been driven out of the house, she simply said: "Keep away from him, Blackie. He was always wrapped up in Red. And because he's done justice on Red and drove him out of the house, that don't mean that he likes you any better than ever. He's got a lot of things agin' you. But keep quiet—and don't let him hear you chirping none because Red is down and you're up. Only tell me, Blackie—was it for you that Red borrowed the money?"

"Certainly not," said Blackie.

But he smiled at her, and she understood!

Andy Connell, indeed, was like a man who had lost his very soul. He roamed through the house and over his place; he went to the mine and probed foolishly among its nooks and corners as though he were hunting for a dear possession which was gone from him. To his wife he uttered only monosyllables; to Blackie he did not speak at all.

"He'll even things up," declared Blackie, "by leaving most of his money to some charity."

"No," said Mrs. Connell. "Keep your mouth shut and don't bother him none and he'll never take the trouble to look for a charity. It'll all come to you. And then——"

"Oh," said he, "I won't forget you, Mrs. Connell."

"That," said she grimly, "is something that you'd better not!"

It was on the seventh day after the departure of Red in disgrace that there appeared at the house of Andy Connell the two most distinguished visitors he had ever received—none other than Chalmer Greenough from Yates Valley, and his daughter Beatrice. And even rough Andy was stirred. He took them up to the mine and showed them where the gold was first struck—first found in a broken stone in the meadow land below; then followed to an obscure outcropping on the side of the hill above, and how the vein had opened out as they followed it through the hill to the other side. Mr. Greenough was charmed. He had made his own millions and many of them, but he had never made them so simply as this! He went through the mine from top to bottom, and he found a time to take Connell apart and say: "Connell, I suppose that you've heard Blackie speak of my daughter?"

"I have," said the miner.

"And I," said Greenough, "have heard her talk of Lewis. In one word, my friend, I've come over here to-day to let you understand that if those young people are really fond of one another, I shall not stand in their way."

"You won't?" gasped out Connell. "Why, sir, if Blackie is gunna be as lucky as that, I don't mind tellin' you that he's the single heir to all that I've got."

"That," said Greenough with much satisfaction, "is very much to the point! Not, you understand, that Beatrice has spoken to me definitely. But I can see that she inclines to Lewis. From the day when he kept her and her horse from a nasty accident in Jackson Corners, she has always felt that there was something owing to him."

So Andy Connell walked the air as they strolled back down the hill, with Blackie and Beatrice before them, laughing together. And they were almost at the bottom of the hill when she pointed and cried out: "Isn't that Red, coming toward us?"

"Hush!" cautioned Blackie. "That's a name Mr. Connell doesn't want to hear; besides, it can't be Red. He's been driven out."

But it *was* Red, and on either side of him rode on the one hand the sheriff

and on the other hand, tall Joe Hooker; and they came straight for the astonished Andy Connell.

"Lemme talk!" said he. "If the sheriff has brung them two in for some sort of crooked work, I'll tell him pretty pronto that I ain't behind young Hardwick."

He strode out before the rest, with an ominous face. But he was not the goal in the eye of Sheriff Sid Guernsey. That warrior of the mountain desert rode briskly past Connell with only a wave of the hand, touched the brim of his hat to Beatrice, nodded to Mr. Greenough, and brought his horse to a halt in front of Blackie.

"Good morning, sheriff," said Blackie as pleasantly as he could.

The answer of the sheriff was simply: "Young feller, what d'you know of the killing of Lew Bender?"

When one has crossed a frightful chasm and stands safely on the other side, it is bewildering to find the same gulf under one's eyes again. Blackie, for all the steadiness of his nerves, was shaken to the ground. And from his lips burst the tell-tale exclamation: "My God!"

That, and the sudden whiteness of his face was proof enough. But the sheriff thrust out a gloved hand and held Blackie while he stabbed the next question at him.

"Bender came here to collect gambling debts from you, Blackie. Is that right?"

Andy Connell at that instant turned squarely upon Blackie. And on either side of him was the lady of his heart—his hope of millions—and her shrewd father. The frightful consequences that might ensue if he were to stumble, choked Blackie. Another instant, and he could have lied smoothly and with an unchanging face. But now this combination of dangers closed his throat and put a pound of lead upon his tongue. He could not speak!

"And when he come to you for the money, you was afraid to ask Connell, there, for it. And you went to Red, there, for help—and Red helped you! And then when he'd raised the money for you——"

"Ten thousand damnations!" shouted Andy Connell. "It ain't no ways possible!" And he rushed at Blackie and caught him by the shoulders.

"Blackie, after he risked himself for the sake of savin' you—him—Red—after the way you always treated him—and then to turn around and knife him—but—my head is turnin' upside down! It ain't possible!"

"It's all a lie!" said Blackie through his poor, numb lips.

But oh, what a weak voice it was, and how falteringly it issued from his lips!

"Let's go away!" said Beatrice Greenough to her father, sick at what she saw.

"No!" said he sternly. "We'll stay here and see this thing out. I think we may be attending the unveiling of a rare rogue, Beatrice. It will be worth seeing."

What little self-possession had remained to Blackie melted away under this stroke from the side. He strove to rally; he thought of flight; and he winced in the hands of Andy Connell. The rough miner wanted no more. He flung Blackie away and the latter, stumbling, fell flat upon the ground.

When he stood up, every back was toward him except the long, lean face of Joe Hooker, wreathed in a sinister grin of satisfaction. And the cowpuncher hooked his thumb over his shoulder and down the road as if to say: "That's the way for you to take, kid! Run along!"

That was not the chief agony for Blackie, however. It did not seem possible that in so few seconds all the ground could be ripped away from under his feet. And here was the sheriff saying:

"You're under arrest, young Connell. Take him out to the barn, Joe, and get him on a hoss. I'll trust him to you. We're gunna see if killings can be bought and paid for in this here land while I'm the sheriff of it!"

So Blackie was led away, and as he went he saw Andy Connell put his thick arm around the shoulders of Red and heard him crying: "Red, by the Eternal, you've been brung back to me! This'll turn 'Rica green, I tell you! It'll turn her green! And it's warmth in my heart! After this, I'll never grow old. Only, Red, how are you gunna learn how to forgive me for the fool that I've been in treatin' you this way?"

"Why," Blackie heard Red say, "I'm glad it all happened. Because from this time on, I guess it will take a good deal to break in between us, eh?"

"There ain't enough dynamite in the world to blast us apart," declared the other with a ringing oath.

Was not that enough for Blackie to see and to hear? No, there was still more agony for him, the keenest touch of all. He saw Chalmer Greenough lay a hand upon the shoulder of Red and say: "I know all about this old enmity between you and Blackie. And if you've tried to do such a thing for him at the end of all your rivalry—why, it was a very fine thing, young man!"

Blackie waited to hear no more. Not even from Beatrice was a single pitying glance sent after him. And he hurried away at the side of Joe Hooker.

"Oh, God!" cried Blackie suddenly. "I wish that I was dead!"

"I'll loan you a gun for the job," said Joe Hooker without mercy. "Eat rat poison, son, and die the kind of a death that you're intended for!"

They did not throw Blackie into prison for that crime of sending another man to kill Lew Bender. Perhaps, after all, there was a sufficient justice done without going so far. All that could be adduced against Blackie was the merest hearsay. There was the testimony of the Mexican, to be sure. And that might have been enough in itself, except that it was proved by Blackie's lawyer, that José Ridal had been raving as he died. So the jury disagreed, and Blackie was set free.

There are condemnations, however, which are purely nonlegal and which cut far deeper than a judge's sentence. And this popular verdict was so heavily against Blackie that he found his life could never again be lived in the West.

He turned his face East; and he carried with him the consolation of knowing that Andy Connell would always support—however meagerly—his adopted son. That was enough for Blackie.

And now that one dream of wealth and prosperity was closed to him, he straightway prepared for new schemes. He closed the door upon that section of his life and resolutely forgot it and all that was behind the door.

Never again did he receive a stab of pain from those old days, except through a little newspaper clipping, which told of the betrothal, a year or two later, of Mr. Oliver Hardwick and Beatrice Greenough.

So the inheritance of Red was complete.

TRAPPER KEEPS WINTER VIGIL

PARADISE INN, high up in the valleys of Mount Rainer, Washington, has but one occupant this winter. He is a government trapper, who remains there to clean up numerous cougars and wolves that prey on the deer, elk, and game birds of the National Park.

"Wings" of Reward

BY

Robert J. Horton

Author of "The Man of the Desert," etc.

THE cabin stood on a timbered slope above the tracks. Behind it rose the granite ramparts of the divide, resembling glistening, white fortifications about the shoulders of Eagle Peak. Below it, across the gap where the tracks cut through, the mountain fell off into space, affording an unobstructed view of the ranges beyond.

Jerry had selected the location for it himself when he had been given the job of watchman up there. *Trackman,* they called him, but Jerry didn't favor that appellation. He was a watchman; ever on the alert for snowslides in the winter, for landslides in the spring and summer and fall, for loose spikes or ties or rails—any of which might send a train to destruction as it swung over the summit.

And they called it a *pension job!* Jerry snorted, shook his white head and puffed out his ruddy cheeks, every time he thought of it. Pension job! And him with ten miles, almost, of treacherous track to watch—to *guard!* How many wrecks had his vigilance averted? Nine. Nine wrecks! He held the fate of the limiteds, the lives of the passengers, in his hands. That's the way Jerry looked at it, and he felt no mean measure of responsibility.

Jerry sat by the stove in the late afternoon and gazed about his well-ordered cabin. His final inspection for the day was over, potatoes were boiling on the stove, there was hot water for tea, and a venison steak reposed on a plate on the kitchen table waiting to be fried when the time came.

But Jerry didn't look altogether contented. There was a glimmer of worry in his faded blue eyes and he puckered his shaggy white eyebrows. Finally he got up and went to the door. He opened it and looked out. Faint streaks of pink showed through the clouds riding above the peaks in the West. Elsewhere the sky was a mottled gray. A few flakes of snow, light and fine, were drifting on the wind.

"Going to storm sure as shootin'," muttered Jerry to himself. "Well, it's just about time for the first good, healthy blizzard. It'll be here soon after dark or I don't know the signs I've been watchin' up here for the last six years."

He closed the door and went back to the stove, where he sat down in his

easy-chair and rubbed the sides of his face reflectively.

"If it weren't for that danged curve 240 I reckon I never would get neuralgy, Teddy." He spoke to a big, black cat that came out from behind the stove. "It's the wind down there. I reckon that wind that hits a feller at 240 is the strongest wind that blows in these here mountains."

It was the bane of Jerry's life in the winter—the wind at curve 240, so called because bridge 240 was on the curve. When Jerry went down on his gasoline speeder he always dreaded that spot on curve 240 where the wind shot around a rocky point and hit him full force. And he had to face that blast for some two miles until he reached the lower end of his patrol. He wouldn't care, only he was subject to neuralgia, and the cold, stinging wind down there kept him in misery for days at a time.

He looked up at a shelf on which were ranged a great number of bottles, all "cures" according to their labels—all fakes according to Jerry, who had been on the point of throwing them all out time after time only to have his hand stayed by recollection of the investment they represented.

A sudden blast of wind struck the cabin, whistled at the windows and went howling away through the timber.

"I knew it!" exclaimed Jerry. "We're in for it to-night, Teddy. I hope it don't interfere much with our radio."

The cat and the small radio outfit—the latter left by some kindly hunters the winter before—were Jerry's only companions. The cat he fed and talked to; the radio brought him music and news from distant cities—if conditions were right. Jerry called his little radio set "Wings," for he thought of the words and notes coming to him through the air on wings, instead of on waves. Every night he would sit with the phones tight against his ears, his mouth and eyes opened wide, and listen, while Teddy, the cat, would lie on the floor and watch him out of big, yellow eyes, each like a huge topaz.

The one great yearning of Jerry's life was to have a fine radio set, with a loud speaker; one that would enable him to "pick up" programs from coast to coast. He had often considered digging into his savings for the required amount; but Jerry was not so young that he could afford to put off reckoning with the day when he would be unable to maintain his lonely vigil on the divide. There were other things he wanted, too—things he needed. But Jerry was too wise to flirt with the poorhouse of the future for the luxuries of the present. He was a model of economy, as well as of efficiency.

The wind swept across the neighboring ranges, shrieked past the cabin, tore through the pines and hurled itself at the granite ramparts below Eagle's snow-crowned dome.

Jerry shivered involuntarily and went for another look out the door. The red streaks in the west had vanished. The air was filled with snow. Night, black and sinister, seemed to envelop the top of the world even as he looked. He closed the door carefully and turned unerringly in the darkened room to the shelf where he kept his lamps. He took one down, placed it on the table, found the matches, and made a light.

Next he took a can of evaporated cream, poured some in a saucer, added a little water, stirred it carefully with a spoon, and put it down on the floor as Teddy's first course. Later the cat would get bits of meat and other food left from Jerry's supper.

Jerry now turned his attention to the venison steak and soon it was in a skillet frying merrily on top the stove, giving off a savory odor which caused Jerry to hurry with his task of taking off the potatoes and preparing his tea. Then he set the table.

Just as he was about to sit down to his supper, piping hot on the table, he heard a sound at the door. He stood motionless, holding the teapot, and listened. Then came a loud knocking. He put down the teapot with a swift intake of breath. A visitor! But Jerry had no visitors way up there. Who could it be? He started. Trouble on the line!

Even as he turned the knocking was repeated more energetically. He hurried to the door and threw it open.

In the semidarkness just outside he made out a burly form and the yellow lamplight dimly revealed a face and eyes that glittered under heavy, black brows.

"How do you do?" he asked.

"Hullo," said the stranger gruffly. "I was walkin' down to Skyline an' saw your light. It's blowin' the furies of the devil an' I thought I'd stop in."

The man thrust his huge bulk forward and Jerry instinctively drew back.

"Come in," he said, although it was hardly necessary for the man was already in the cabin, his beady, black eyes darting everywhere in quick appraisal.

A gust of wind sent a flurry of snow scuttling in and Jerry shut the door against the blast.

The visitor, completing his inspection of the main room of the cabin, looked swiftly into Jerry's little bedroom and into the little wood shed that opened off the main room at the rear to the right of the stove.

"All alone, eh!" he said, scowling at Jerry.

The man's manner was not altogether genial, Jerry thought; his look and words seemed to convey a subtle menace. Jerry had been observing him. He had noticed the rough clothing and shoes, the worn Mackinaw that was almost a size too small for the big shoulders it incased, the cap drawn down tight over the man's massive head. "Have you had your supper?" he asked, almost timidly.

"Supper? Of course I haven't had my supper. How would I have my supper when I've been walking over the hump for three hours?"

"I didn't—know," faltered Jerry. "You come from the snow sheds, I suppose? Been working there?"

The man glared. "Of course I've been workin' there. Where else would a workin' stiff work up here, eh? An' I'm ready to eat. You hear that? I'm ready to eat."

Jerry motioned to the table. He knew there were some rough characters working on the snow sheds on the west side of the divide. He assumed that this man had quit and was making for the east, over the summit, when the blizzard hit him. Almost every day, when making the run of his patrol on his speeder, he saw men such as this one walking over the summit to go down to Skyline where they could catch a freight going east. He knew, too, that every spring when the snow went off bodies were found in the gulch.

"Don't you want to take off your mackinaw an' cap an' wash?" he asked, pouring a cup of tea as the man sat down at the table.

The other looked up with a snarl. "Take off my cap an' wash?" he sneered. "Maybe I ain't polite enough for you, eh? You with your snug cabin an' good grub an' soft job! You leave well enough alone! An' cook some more grub," he added, as he surveyed what had been placed before him. "I'm a full-growed man an' I have to have lots of meat. Cook some more meat. You hear me?"

Jerry turned to the stove. He had detected a gleam of genuine malice in the man's beady eyes. A tough customer! Well, what was to be expected? The snow-shed crews were recruited from the "stiff" sections of coast cities. The contractors took what they could get; for labor was not plentiful and the men did not stay long.

He set about frying some more of the venison and thanked his stars that he had been lucky enough to get a deer in the clearing a few days before. Jerry knew it was the part of wisdom to humor his uninvited guest. For Jerry was alone and he knew there was no possibility of any one coming there that night; indeed, it was rarely that he had a visitor, even in the daytime in the best of weather.

The man ate greedily, taking huge mouthfuls, and glaring at Jerry while he chewed his food. He drank all the tea and demanded more. Jerry made fresh tea, striving to conceal the resentment he felt within him.

When the man had finished he pushed back from the table and demanded tobacco. When Jerry put his tobacco box on the table the uninvited guest drew a pipe from a pocket of his mackinaw, filled and lighted it, and sat watching Jerry while the latter ate his own supper. He continued to sit, still clothed in Mackinaw and cap, while Jerry washed the dishes and put the cabin to rights. The old watchman wondered if the man intended to brave the blizzard and go on that night. It would be taking a chance with death to do so, but this man might attempt it. He was strong enough.

"What's that?" asked the visitor suddenly when Jerry had finished his tasks. He pointed to Jerry's little radio set on a stand near the easy-chair.

"That's my radio," said Jerry, unable to keep a wistful note of pride out of his voice.

"What? A radio? That dinky little thing!" The man laughed harshly. "Does it work?"

"Not as well as I'd like it to," said Jerry, growing more resentful. "Sometimes it does pretty good."

"Let's listen in," said the man, going to the easy-chair and dropping down in it. He put the phones to his ears while Jerry made the adjustments.

"Not a thing!" sneered the big man. "Oh, yes, I caught a note or two of some fiddler then. Listen to her screeech or something. Ha, ha, ha!" He put the ear phones down. "That thing's a joke. Why, we had one——" He stopped suddenly and scowled.

"Yes, yes," said Jerry eagerly. "You had one?"

"We had one in a lumber camp I worked in on the coast that you could hear all over the place," said the man. He made a grimace and threw the ear phones from him.

Jerry started up with a little cry. The man might break the set. He looked wildly at the rifle that reposed on two pegs over one of the small windows. The man's eyes followed his glance.

"So?" said the man slowly. He looked darkly at Jerry. "You ain't set on entertaining me none, eh? Don't like it because I'm here?"

He rose swiftly and walked to the window, his steps shaking the floor. "You'd like to drive me out into the blizzard, eh?" he snarled.

He took down the gun, pumped the cartridges out on the floor and walked to the door. He opened the door, stepped out and threw the gun with all his powerful strength. Jerry knew the rifle would probably land clear down in the cut. He couldn't hope to get it back that night. The wind swept in through the door with tremendous velocity and the lamp went out.

"Light that lamp!" came the hoarse command as the door slammed shut.

Jerry hastened to obey. When the lamp wick was burning again the man stood glowering at him. Finally the man spoke.

"Look here, you old rat, I need some sleep. I'm goin' to stay here to-night, understand? Do you understand that? I'm goin' to stay here an' I'm goin' to sleep, an' if you try any tricks, I'll break your back with my hands!"

He held his great fists before Jerry's startled eyes, slowly opening his hands and closing them with a convulsive movement.

"You—you can sleep in my room," said Jerry. "I won't bother you."

"See that you don't," warned the other.

Jerry saw the red gleam of malice in the man's eyes. He noticed a pallor of the face and ascribed it to rage. He shouldn't have looked at that gun.

He hurriedly lighted another lamp and led the way into his bedroom. The man looked at the modest bunk, then examined the door to make sure there was a way to secure it.

"Get out!" he snarled at Jerry.

The old man went out, the door closed and he heard the bar slipped into place. He dropped into his easy-chair with a sigh of relief. At least he was rid of his unwelcome guest for the night, even though it was at the expense of his own rest.

The blizzard raged by spells; for the severe blowing of the wind was not continuous. There were distinct lulls —freaks of the storm—when all would be still. The cat came out from behind the stove and settled down before Jerry's chair, looking up at him. The stove hearth glowed a ruddy red with coals. Jerry picked up the ear phones of his radio and began tuning in.

He caught snatches of music, and then

—broadcasting—escape from the State penitentiary—John Baum, serving a life sentence for murder—desperate and armed—dangerous—description—tall, very heavy—weighing—pounds—color of eyes—smooth shaven, beard would be reddish brown—one thousand dollars reward for his capture—notify nearest sheriff or warden—

The voice ended suddenly as the wind struck the cabin with a force that almost made it rock.

Jerry put aside the ear phones. He was thrilled. During a big lull in the storm he had received the most startling bit of news that he had ever heard over the radio. True, he hadn't caught all of it; but he had heard enough to know that the escape of a desperate prisoner from the State penitentiary was being broadcast. The description was meager, but there was no doubt as to the reward.

Jerry looked at the little instrument wonderingly. To him it was the marvel of marvels. Through the air from miles and miles away, this information had come to him way up there on the divide. It was wonderful what uses the radio could be put to. It might result in the capture of the escaped murderer. It was certainly making life harder for criminals. They probably had a radio in the penitentiary; yes, he believed he had read something about it. They had a receiving set, anyway. Perhaps they could also broadcast and the warden could sit in his office and send out the description of the escaped convict.

Jerry started suddenly. His unwelcome visitor! The thought almost took his breath away. He remembered the man's coarse face, the beady eyes, the huge frame—the part of the description had said something about "tall, very heavy." This man was tall and heavy. Too bad he hadn't been able to catch the weight, and the color of the eyes. This man was smooth shaven; but if his beard had been noticeable it might have been a reddish brown. Perhaps he, Jerry, would be able to tell by the man's beard growth in the morning.

But, pshaw! What would an escaped convict be doing up there? And walking! Any convict who had any sense would make for the coast, where he could lose himself in a big city or get away on a ship, or—but there were so many ways to travel on from the coast.

No, Jerry had seen too many roughs from the snow sheds not to be able to recognize one on sight. A thousand dollars reward! Jerry mused on what

he could do with such a sum. The wind howled and moaned, and, at intervals, shrieked and raged in the pines. It shook the cabin and hurled the snow against the windowpanes in a fury. Jerry dozed in his chair.

He was awakened rudely. His visitor was shaking him roughly by the shoulder. Jerry started up and looked about, rubbing his eyes. The white light of dawn was shining through the panes. He had slept all night. The cabin was cold, for the fire had gone out.

"Time we was gettin' breakfast an' gettin' out of here," said the gruff voice above him. "'C'm on, get a move on."

Jerry got up stiffly and hobbled to the wood box. Soon he had a fire going in the stove. His guest was moving about restlessly. Jerry looked out the door and saw that it had stopped snowing. He shivered as he thought of his patrol and that wind down at curve 240.

He stole a look at the man as he put the coffeepot on the stove. His visitor wore his cap and carried his Mackinaw under one arm. He appeared to be impatient to start. Yes, he certainly looked like one of those snowshed laborers. Then Jerry remembered the radio warning. The man's beard had sprouted. Jerry edged about in an effort to get a good look at the man's chin and finally was rewarded when the man stopped where the light from the window shone directly on his face. But Jerry couldn't determine that it was reddish brown. He decided it wasn't. Well, the man was a ruffian all the same. Jerry would be glad to get rid of him at any cost.

They ate breakfast silently. When they had finished the man spoke.

"You have to go down the track this mornin', don't you?" His tone was less gruff; his manner less aggressive.

Jerry correctly surmised that the man was going to ask the favor of riding down with him and for that reason he was toning down a bit.

"Yes, I have to cover my patrol first thing," said Jerry.

"Suppose you won't object to givin' me a lift down a ways," said the man smoothly.

"No, you are welcome to come along," replied Jerry. What a relief it would be to get rid of the man.

"All right, let's go," said the other, putting on his Mackinaw.

Jerry put on his own Mackinaw, his fur cap, his overshoes and his big mittens. It would be a cold ride. He dreaded the wind. They walked together down to the shed where the speeder was housed. Jerry had trouble starting it and the man helped him, apparently more and more eager to get started.

"Do you go as far as Skyline?" the man asked with a keen look.

Jerry shook his head. "About a mile this side," he said. "Of course, I could run down——"

"No, you needn't bother," the man put in. "That'll be all right for me."

They pushed the little car onto the rails which had been cleared of snow by a freight train that had passed early in the morning. The man took his place in front, as Jerry indicated, and Jerry sat in the rear. Their seat was the box covering and protecting the motor. Two sacks of cement were on the left side of the car. Jerry kicked aside a short piece of two-by-four near the brake pedal and they started off.

There was little need for the motor after the car got under way for it was all down grade. When they had got a good start, Jerry threw out the clutch. They went spinning down the track at a good rate of speed and Jerry was compelled to use the brake to prevent the little car from going too fast.

The track wound around the mountain and down a number of switchbacks. Then came a long, winding easy grade

that ended in the beginning of a great curve—curve 240. Jerry braced himself and grinned. Wait till they struck the rocky point. The shock of the blast would be some measure of revenge on his passenger. The point suddenly hove in view, they swung around it, and the blast struck them full force.

It took the man in front by surprise. His head went up and the wind ripped his cap from his head and swept it away into the cañon on the left; it tore open his Mackinaw, almost took him off his seat. He clutched at the center rail of the seat to hold on. And in the roar of the wind he could not hear the motor running to force the car against the blast.

They swung around the curve at good speed and came to another long, winding down grade. The car bounced and shook as it gathered momentum. The man managed to turn his head and shout at Jerry but Jerry did not bear him. He was looking at the man's head. That uncovered head fascinated him.

The man had to give all his attention to holding on, lest he should be thrown from the bouncing car. Slowly Jerry's look changed; his eyes snapped with an unusual fire; his lips drew into a fine white line. He pushed the piece of two-by-four over so that it was under the left side of the top of the brake pedal. This prevented him from putting on the brake full force.

The car tore down the grade, swerving from left to right, bouncing and bobbing. They had to hold on with all their strength. The man managed to turn around again and Jerry made a gesture of helplessness, pointing to the brake and stamping it with his foot, indicating that it was out of order. He could see the man's lips moving and knew that he was cursing. But there was also a look of terror in the man's eyes. Would he try to jump? Jerry smiled grimly. Let him try! It would do him little good. One risk was as good as another and the look in the man's eyes told him plainly that he would not jump.

Jerry leaned down as if he was working with the brake and now and then he slowed the car a little—just enough to prevent its jumping the track. It was the fastest he had ever gone. The speed frightened him, but he kept his lips tightly pressed and a light of determination shone in his eyes.

Skyline hove in sight. But Skyline was merely a water tank and section crew headquarters. Eight miles below Skyline was Newfield, a mining and lumber camp of some size. There was also some one in Newfield whom Jerry wanted to see. They plunged through Skyline at a terrific rate of speed. The section gang, getting out their hand car, stared after them in astonishment.

Jerry knew his track. He knew they were coming to a long, straight, down grade of three miles. He let the car run free and the wind took his breath away. He had to shield his face with his coat sleeve. The man, clinging to the rail, his face white as death, stared back at him out of eyes wide with horror and fear. Jerry knew. The man was afraid of death.

Their speed increased to a point where Jerry again began to fumble with the brake. Then he straightened and kicked the piece of timber from under the top of the pedal. His eyes blazed defiance at the big man, and the latter doubtless mistook the look for one of fear and desperation. He looked ahead. To the right was a mighty cañon, deep and yawning, and far below, down the cañon, where the tracks crossed it on a high trestle, could be seen a white feather of smoke. A train!

The man fairly clutched the air with his free hand as he pointed for Jerry's benefit. But Jerry paid scant attention. He knew that Newfield was between them and the train and that the train

would be certain to stop there. He let the car race on and that it didn't leave the tracks was due solely to the weight of the big man in front and the two heavy sacks of cement. As it was, it all but left the rails on the curves. A last long pitch and they came in sight of Newfield.

The train was pulling into the station as they bore down upon it with the speed of a limited. Jerry applied the brake as the man made a move as if he would jump. The car began to slow down and the man looked behind. Jerry was bending over the brake. He straightened with a reassuring smile to give the impression that he had managed to get it in order at last.

They came to a stop within a yard of the engine of the train standing at the station. The man's body grew limp and he wiped cold perspiration from his face and brow as Jerry hopped off and made a signal to some one standing near the engine.

The man on the front of the speeder, momentarily weakened by the reaction, stared dully as Jerry spoke to the man he had beckoned to. The engineer joined them. As the three of them approached the speeder the passenger suddenly came to life. He leaped to his feet and jumped from the car. But the three were upon him in an instant. The engineer landed full on his jaw while the Newfield deputy grasped him from behind. In another moment, as the fireman and others came running to help, the deputy had the handcuffs on his wrists. Then the deputy drew a gun from the man's hip pocket and tore open his shirt revealing his prison underwear.

"I knew it the minute I saw his head!" Jerry was exclaiming in great excitement. "When the wind at 240 blew off his cap an' I saw that close-cropped hair I knew I was right. It's him, all right. It's John Baum an' there's a thousand-dollar reward out for him!"

The prisoner's face was contorted, his eyes blazed red and he made a lunge toward the old man. But the deputy and engineer jerked him back.

"You'll get the reward, Jerry," the deputy promised.

In the cabin on the slope above the tracks, Jerry, idling with the dials of a new and beautiful radio set, addressed the cat on the floor at his feet.

"So that's what he meant, Teddy, when he made that break about the big radio. He made fun of ours an' said they had a big one in—a lumber camp. I thought it sounded queer at the time. It was in the penitentiary they had that set, Teddy. No wonder he kept his cap on. But as soon's I saw that shaved head, with just color enough in it to——"

He stopped suddenly and his eyes lighted up.

Station W C A P, Washington, D. C., broadcasting. The next selection will be the "Stars and Stripes Forever," played by the U. S. navy band.

Jerry settled back in his chair contentedly.

THE ALASKAN RAILROAD PROFITS

SCOTT C. BONE, governor of Alaska, recently declared that no profit may be expected from the Alaskan government railroad for some years to come. Eventually, he said, it would pay for itself through its aid in developing the territory.

Land o' Freedom

By James Edward Hungerford

I WANT to be back
In a mountainside shack,
Out there where the ol' Rockies loom,
An' snowy peaks rise
In the sunny, blue skies,
An' a man has got plenty o' room!
I am longin' to be
Where a feller is free
To go where he wants to, an' when,
In the ol' golden West,
Where the sun goes to rest—
Yep! I'm yearnin' to be there again!

I want to be boss
O' a little bronc hoss,
That has got heaps o' git-up-an'-git,
With an unbroken pride,
An' a free-swingin' stride,
That will never lay down 'er say quit!
I want to be dressed
In the duds I like best,
An' havin' the freedom I crave,
Out there in the West,
In the land o' sweet rest,
In the home o' the free an' the brave!

I want to be back
On the ol' twistin' track,
That is windin' through gulch an' ravine.
The land o' tall trees,
Where the breath o' the breeze
Is bracin', sweet-scented, an' clean!
I want to be there
In that paradise, where
There's pine trees—oh! long may they wave—
In the ol' golden West,
Where the sun goes to rest,
In the land o' the free an' the brave!

Greenbacks on the Trail

By

Reginald C. Barker

Author of "Star-shine Bill's Curtained Trail," etc.

EVEN before he opened the door, "Grizzly" Gallagher knew that the one seeking admittance was not only a stranger to the West, but also that he, or she, was a stranger to the hills. For a Westerner would not have knocked timidly at the door; and any one who had ever met the old trapper would not have knocked at all. He would have been too sure of his welcome.

"I swan," muttered Grizzly Gallagher into his silver-tipped beard. "I most sartinly do! Seems like the hills are getting turribly overpopulated of late years; more trouble hatching, I suppose. Waal, this time, I'll be doggoned if I don't get ready for it."

Quietly Grizzly Gallagher arose from his seat, and, taking a .45 Colt's six-shooter from where it hung on one of the corner posts of his bunk, he slipped it into his waistband, and with one hand on its butt, swung open the door of the cabin.

So formidable did the bearded old trapper appear, that the man holding in his hand the halter rope of a heavily laden pack horse, involuntarily stepped back a pace.

"I reck'n," he said in a peculiarly nasal tone, "that you're Grizzly Gallagher."

Grizzly didn't like that nasal voice; didn't like the droop of the stranger's left eye, that owing to some peculiar affliction kept up an intermittent winking as though hinting that between him and Grizzly there existed a secret understanding. And Grizzly didn't like the wide, flaring nostrils of the blob of a nose that seemed to be in collusion with the forehead in an effort to conceal itself beneath an old gray hat.

Crook, if ever there was one, decided Grizzly Gallagher, and red-haired, at that!

"You reck'n right, stranger," he admitted, with no hint of welcome. "Folks call me Grizzly Gallagher."

"Hunkers is my name," said the stranger. "Byrd Hunkers, from Miscattekunk, Maine. I've come West for my health."

"The last stranger that visited me," Grizzly Gallagher informed him, "said the same thing. And he must have found it, for he stole all my bacon."

"Then you don't believe me, Mr. Gallagher?"

"I'm a mite suspicious," admitted Grizzly Gallagher. "What ails you?"

"Just run down," answered Hunkers. "Sort of nervous breakdown; need fresh air and lots of exercise. So I thought I'd put in a winter trapping in the Salmon River Mountains. Used to trap some back on the Piscatiquis when I was a boy."

"How'd you happen to find me?" asked Grizzly Gallagher. "How'd you happen to know my name?'

"Heard of you in McCall," was the answer. "Old party—'Lady' Malone, that runs the restaurant—told me that maybe you'd let me be your partner this winter. Then at Lake-where-the-wind-never-blows I called at a homestead with a package that Lady Malone asked me to leave there, and Mrs. Blaine—was that the name?—told me the same thing and put me on the trail to your cabin. Cute little boy she's got, but delicate."

"Delicate nothing!" exclaimed Grizzly Gallagher. "That's my kid—at least he's named after me, Teddy Gallagher Blaine.

"Your story sounds all right," continued Grizzly, "and you may as well come in and eat, seeing as you're here. But let me tell you first and last, Mr. Hunkers, I don't aim to take a partner this winter."

"Why?" Byrd Hunkers watched Grizzly as he deftly sliced some venison steak and dredged it in flour preparatory to frying it in bear lard. "What have you against me?"

"Nothing," admitted Grizzly Gallagher. "Not a thing. But I've got stung too many times in the last few years to think about taking in any more strangers. The first one looked like a gentleman and proved to be a killer. He tried to blow me up with dynamite. The second one was a bank thief. I buried him. And the third and fourth and fifth and sixth were out-and-out bad ones. Yet each one had a better story than yours with which to gain my confidence."

"But I've told you the truth," persisted Byrd Hunkers. "Why don't you believe me?"

"To tell *you* the truth," answered the old trapper bluntly, "I don't cotton to your looks. You may be on the squar', but your face doesn't advertise it. And, fu'thermore, I don't like the way you keep winkin' at me."

"I can't help my looks," said Byrd Hunkers, "any more than you can. As for the winking, I don't like that any better than you do, but it will pass away in time. It's only nervousness."

"Waal," said Grizzly Gallagher as he set two plates on the table, "set up an' eat. And after that I'll take you over to the old Conyers' cabin in Shadow Valley. If you're sot on trapping, you don't need any partner. Go ahead and trap by yourself, like I'm doing."

"Unless you will go in with me," said the other, "I wouldn't want to trespass on your range."

"I guess I won't miss what fur you catch," said Grizzly, "an' you'll find Shadow Valley a good location if you're an honest-to-goodness trapper."

"I'm not an expert," admitted Byrd Hunkers, "and I'm doing it more for the love of the game than with the hope of making money out of it. But if there is any fur in this country, I reck'n I'll get my share of it."

He did, too. Even Grizzly Gallagher had to acknowledge to himself that seldom had he met a rival who was so proficient at the trapping game as Byrd Hunkers. Yet deep in his heart Grizzly Gallagher had a conviction that the man was other than he professed to be. But what?

Day after day, in an effort to get some clew to Byrd Hunkers' real reason for coming to the hills, Grizzly Gallagher shadowed him up hill and down dale. But apparently the stranger was attending strictly to the business of trapping.

Only once, when passing the cabin in Shadow Valley late in the evening, did Grizzly Gallagher do something he hated himself for. Silently as a cougar, he crept up to the window of the old cabin and pressed his bearded face against the pane.

Standing by the bunk with his back

to the window, Byrd Hunkers was doing something with a black leather case. Grizzly Gallagher could not see very well into the dimly lighted cabin, and as he moved slightly, beneath his feet a dry stick snapped. Instantly the man by the bunk turned, and for just a second Grizzly Gallagher saw the gleam of metal—or jewels.

"I swan," he muttered. "I most sartinly do! So I wasn't mistaken in him after all. Guess I'll just take a sashay down to McCall and put Sheriff Mahoney on his track."

"Is that the man?" Sheriff Mahoney shoved a photograph toward Grizzly Gallagher.

The picture was that of a tall, polished-looking man with iron gray hair, and dressed in a good-looking business suit—a man that would have been awarded first prize in a contest for handsome men.

"Waal, I guess not!" Scorn ineffable was in Grizzly Gallagher's voice. "The man I'm speaking of is a downright bad looker, flat nose, no forehead, sniffy sort of voice, eye that winks all the time, and a complexion like a bullfrog that's got poor digestion. And he's got something in a black leather case hidden away in his cabin, something that gleams like di'monds might."

Sheriff Mahoney showed Grizzly Gallagher a number of photographs, but none of them remotely resembled Byrd Hunkers. And nowhere among the list of criminals wanted by the law could he find any description which tallied at all either with the speech or looks of the man trapping from the cabin in Shadow Valley.

"Can't arrest him for owning a black leather case," said Sheriff Mahoney, "not even if it *is* filled with di'monds. You'll have to show more evidence than that that he is a criminal. Now if it was that feller, things would be different." And he once more showed Grizzly Gallagher the photo of the distinguished-looking man in the business suit.

"Why, who is he?" asked Grizzly. "What's he been and done? Written somebody else's name at the bottom of a check?"

"That," said Sheriff Mahoney, pulling at the ends of his long mustache, "is 'Dude' Merrill. He's one of the fastest gunmen this side of Kansas City, and is wanted for—among other things—holding up the First National bank, killing the cashier and getting clear away with several thousand dollars in currency."

"I swan!" exclaimed Grizzly Gallagher. "I most sartinly do! I thought he was a Sunday school teacher!"

"'When last seen," Sheriff Mahoney read aloud from the printed notice, "Dude Merrill was headed toward Salmon River. Familiar with the mountains since boyhood, it is expected that he will essay to cross the range and make connections with the N. T. & G. Railroad, from where he will take a train to San Francisco. This man is considered very dangerous, and will stop at nothing. All peace officers and others are warned to neglect no precautions in taking measures for his apprehension.'"

"There's a thousand dollars reward on him, dead or alive, too," said Sheriff Mahoney, "so if I were you, I'd keep an eye peeled."

"A thousand dollars!" exclaimed Grizzly Gallagher. "Guess I'll return to camp by way of Lake-where-the-wind-never-blows and tell Teddy Blaine about that, for he and Hattie could sure use the money."

"Teddy was in town yesterday," said the sheriff, "and I told him about it. But seems like his kid is ailing, and he was in such a stew about that that he ddn't pay much attention to what I said about Dude Merrill."

Teddy's kid ailing! Seemed as though Grizzly Gallagher's beard sud-

denly constricted his throat. His Teddy Gallagher Blaine ailing? What could be the matter?

"But Doc Carroll was out of town," said Sheriff Mahoney, "so all Teddy could do was to hotfoot it back with a bunch of advice he'd gathered from the women here in town."

Grizzly Gallagher did not hear the last words; he, too, was "hotfooting" it as fast as he could to the horse he had left tied in front of Lady Malone's restaurant up the street. Maybe he could do something himself, for during his forty years in the big hills Grizzly Gallagher had learned the value of a number of medicinal herbs.

Just for a moment the old trapper dropped in to see Hattie's mother—Lady Malone. As usual she was busily engaged in preparing a meal for the boys who worked in the little sawmill at the edge of Big Payette Lake.

"Arrah!" exclaimed Lady Malone as she raised a flushed face from the range. "It's all worrit up ye are, Grizzly Gallagher. Tell Lady Malone what ails her boy, for 'tis a long day since I've seen ye worrit."

"It's Teddy Gallagher Blaine!" The old trapper's voice was hoarse with fear. "Sheriff Mahoney says he's dyin'." Which, of course, was not exactly the truth.

"Dyin' me eye!" exclaimed Lady Malone. "It's naught but a touch av the colic he's havin'. For it's his mother herself who will give him pickles to eat."

"Then I'll be going, Lady Malone," said Grizzly Gallagher, "thanking you kindly for the cheering news that lifted a load off my heart."

Standing on the porch in front of the restaurant, Lady Malone wiped her eyes with a corner of her apron as she watched Grizzly Gallagher ride away on the trail to Teddy's homestead at Lake-where-the-wind-never-blows.

"Arrah, 'tis the heart of him!" she exclaimed. "It's Grizzly Gallagher has the heart of a man."

Slowly Grizzly Gallagher rode up the trail that leads by way of Lost Valley to Gray Dog Peak and thence down the other side to the little warm lake where Teddy Blaine and his wife and baby lived on their homestead. Very glad now was the heart of Grizzly Gallagher as he rode through the last hours of the dying day and watched the sun sinking in a blaze of golden splendor over the lonely monoliths of Gray Dog Peak.

So absorbed in a reverie did the old trapper become that he almost fell from the saddle when unexpectedly his horse shied at an object in the trail.

"I swan!" exclaimed Grizzly Gallagher. "Nearly threw me that time, Mose, didn't you?" And then as he saw what had caused the animal to shy, Grizzly Gallagher hastily dismounted.

Lying in the narrow trail was a package of currency with a strip of white paper fastened around its center by a narrow rubber band.

"One thousand dollars!" exclaimed the old trapper, as he read the notation. "I swan. I most sartinly do!"

Shoving the money inside one of his saddlebags, Grizzly Gallagher stopped and examined the trail closely for tracks. And there they were! Tracks of narrow-toed, rubber-heeled shoes, such as are seldom worn by mountaineers.

And the tracks of those narrow-pointed shoes were pointing up the trail. Dude Merrill had passed that way! Who else would be carrying a thousand dollars in bills?

A thousand dollars! Already temporarily in Grizzly Gallagher's possession, it would become his permanently if he could lay Dude Merrill by the heels. Then, struck by a sudden thought, he hit ol' Mose such a resounding thump just behind the saddle that the old horse wagged his tail like a suddenly pleased dog, and broke into

a trot that lasted as much as a minute and a half.

"Suppose Dude Merrill should decide to hold up Teddy and Hattie and the baby on their homestead!" thought Grizzly Gallagher. "Why, Dude Merrill might even kill Teddy—hadn't Sheriff Mahoney said that the man was a desperado who would stop at nothing?"

Why didn't ol' Mose move faster? Dog-gone it, he was slower than a Chinook wind. Clambering out of the saddle, Grizzly Gallagher did something of which the day before he would have deemed himself incapable. He cut a nice long switch from a cluster of vine maple that grew beside the trail and for the remainder of the distance to Teddy's homestead ol' Mose must have thought Grizzly had suddenly become endowed with the ferocity commonly attributed to the beast whose name he bore.

"You mean old thing," said Hattie to Grizzly when she noted ol' Mose's heaving bellows and foaming sides. "What in the world did you use a horse that way for?"

Rounding the corner of the house with the baby in his arms, Teddy Blaine cast an astonished glance at the horse and his old partner, while Teddy Gallagher Blaine stretched out his little arms and cried in childish ecstasy: "Gizzy Ga-ga, Gizzy Ga-ga!"

But for once Grizzly Gallagher ignored his idol. "Seen anything of a long feller that looks like a preacher?" he asked.

"Grizzly must mean Mr. Welcome," said Hattie, using the name by which Dude Merrill had introduced himself. "Sure we did; he stopped here for dinner and paid for it with a twenty-dollar bill. When I said that I didn't have any change, he gave it to the baby so's he could start a bank account of his own. Wasn't that nice?"

"Sure was," agreed Grizzly Gallagher. "Particularly when he didn't happen to own the money." And he repeated Sheriff Mahoney's story and showed Teddy and his wife the package of currency he had picked up on the trail.

"I don't believe it," said Hattie. "Mr. Welcome was not that kind of a man. He was a perfect gentleman!"

"Didn't say which way he was going, did he?" asked Grizzly Gallagher.

"He said he was just riding through the mountains examining the timber with a view to building a sawmill here at Lake-where-the-wind-never-blows," replied Hattie. "He intimated that he was a man of vast resources and intended financing some kind of colonization project."

"I swan!" exclaimed Grizzly Gallagher. "I most sartinly do! Then you don't know which way he headed?"

"I do," spoke up Teddy. "I told him that he'd better stop over to-night with Byrd Hunkers, in Shadow Valley. That'll be the last inhabited cabin he will find except yours on Cashaway Creek. And that's too much out of his way; I don't think he'll go there."

"I don't think so either," said Grizzly softly, "not if I meet him first. You folks will have to put up ol' Mose to-night. He's all tuckered out. And besides, I can make it quicker afoot across the Gray Dog cut-off."

"You are not going on to-night, Grizzly," cried Hattie. "Why, you haven't even *spoken* to the baby!"

"Sorry," said Grizzly Gallagher curtly, "but I got to be travelin'; explanations later."

"Well, you bring Byrd Hunkers over for dinner Sunday," said Hattie. "It must be lonelier than all get-out for him there in Shadow Valley."

"Another of your fine friends," answered Grizzly Gallagher. "Seems like these hills are gettin' altogether too thickly populated with bad men for a peace-loving old man like me. All right, have your own way; I'll bring the pole-

cat over if I have to drag him by the ears."

"What in the world has come over Grizzly Gallagher?" asked Hattie of her husband as they watched the old trapper swing off into the deepening shadows. "I've never seen him act this way before."

"He's growing old, sweetheart," said Teddy with conviction. "I wouldn't wonder if we have to take him in for the rest of his life."

"Grizzly Gallagher will never want for a home so long as we have a roof over our heads," said Hattie, "for had it not been for him, I don't suppose you and I would ever have met."

But no one would have believed that Grizzly Gallagher was approaching senility could he have been observed as he strode through the woods at a gait that Teddy Blaine himself, although forty years younger, would have found it hard to equal.

One thought alone was in Grizzly Gallagher's mind, and that was to catch up with Dude Merrill before he left Byrd Hunkers' cabin.

Over the top of Gray Dog Peak where moon-draped monoliths in silence watched him pass, strode Grizzly Gallagher without faltering, and down the other side to where two thousand feet below he could just see the dark spot in the mountains which advertised the heavy timber of Shadow Valley.

"I swan!" Suddenly the exclamation burst from Grizzly Gallagher's bearded lips as the thought struck him that possibly there was collusion between Dude Merrill and Byrd Hunkers. Of course! Why not? Byrd Hunkers had been sent on in advance to prepare a place to which Dude Merrill could flee after the robbery and get supplies and ammunition for his further flight to a place where he would be beyond danger of capture. Grizzly Gallagher wondered why he hadn't thought of the solution before. Queer what the world was coming to nowadadys, when every second man one met seemed to be either a crook or in collusion with crooks.

By the etarnal! Grizzly Gallagher would show them this time. Bad man was Dude Merrill? Expert gunman was he and fastest shot that side of Kansas City? Well, Grizzly Gallagher himself knew a thing or two about guns. He'd show Dude Merrill and Byrd Hunkers a thing or two himself before the night was out.

Stealthily as an Indian Grizzly Gallagher made his way across Shadow Valley to where a dim light twinkling through the trees advertised the presence of Byrd Hunkers' cabin. Noiselessly the old trapper crawled toward the window from which he had seen Byrd Hunkers examining the contents of the black leather case. Crouched beneath the window, once more Grizzly Gallagher pressed his bearded face against the pane, and by the light of a full moon that shone over his left shoulder, he peered within.

"I swan," he muttered incredulously. "I most sartinly do!"

For playing poker by the light of a smoky lamp was Byrd Hunkers and a man whom Grizzly knew was none other than Dude Merrill. And in front of Dude Merrill was a stack of bills that must have mounted into thousands of dollars. By the side of the pile of money was a silver-mounted revolver of large caliber; long barreled, sinister looking and cruel.

Slowly Grizzly Gallagher arose to his feet and crept stealthily around the house to the door. With gun in hand he pushed open the door and commanded:

"Hands up, Dude Merrill; you too, Hunkers!"

Then, like a lightning flash came a report, and the room was plunged in darkness. Dude Merrill had shot out the light. Then, from inside the suddenly darkened cabin two guns roared and two flashes of orange flame streaked

toward Grizzly Gallagher. His gun roared in reply to the staccato fusillade; then suddenly the guns fell silent and a stream of something warm began to spurt upward in little dashes from the artery on the inside of Grizzly Gallagher's left arm. He staggered out of the doorway and made his way into the night.

Queer, was the world turning around faster than usual, or was it Grizzly Gallagher's head? He wasn't sure. Seemed like his feet were growing strangely light; wasn't he soaring upward and onward to where an old man could sleep and sleep—and slee-eep. Slowly as his life stream left his veins, Grizzly Gallagher's knees crumpled under him, and he sank to the ground.

Surely that was iodine he smelled! Queer he hadn't expected to find iodine in heaven or wherever it was that he had arrived. Seemed, too, that there was a light shining against his eyelids. Maybe it was a star, or maybe—he tried to raise his head, but couldn't. Then a voice said:

"Steady, old man, I cal'late you'll do nicely now."

Grizzly Gallagher opened his eyes and saw bending over him the homely features of Byrd Hunkers.

"I thought——" Grizzly Gallagher tried to speak, but he was very weak from loss of blood, and all he could do was to stare vacantly at a black leather case that lay open on the table. Inside, all shiny and new, was a set of beautifully polished steel surgical instruments.

"But—but I don't understand," murmured Grizzly Gallagher hazily. "I thought you were a robber or a killer and that you had money or jewels in that thar case. What and who are you, a doctor?"

"Not yet," grinned Byrd Hunkers bashfully. "Just an overworked medical student, trying to regain my health by spending a winter in the hills."

"I swan!" muttered Grizzly Gallagher. "And I tried to kill you!"

"You did kill Mr. Welcome," said Byrd Hunkers. "Shot him twice squarely through the head. Grizzly Gallagher, you'd better have died, too."

"We'll talk — about — that — later, Doc." Grizzly Gallagher was growing weaker again. "But why didn't you tell me you were a doctor? You'd have saved me—a pile of worryin' about Teddy Gallagher Blaine."

"You were too ready to judge by appearances," said Byrd Hunkers, "so it wouldn't have done me any good."

ARROWHEAD FOUND IN DUCK

CHARLES GLESSNER, of Onida, South Dakota, a short time ago killed a duck which was found to have embedded in its breast a bone arrowhead. It is believed that the arrowhead, which is as sharp as a needle and only an inch in length, is made from walrus bone. The bird, one of the many which come from the North into this part of the country each fall, is believed to have migrated from as far north as the Arctic.

The body around the arrowhead was in perfect condition and indicated that the wound must have been healed for several weeks. Glessner explained that the bird was as strong apparently on the wing as any of its companions. The arrowhead will be kept in an effort to learn, if possible, what particular tribe of the far North uses heads of this type of hunting arrows.

Thornton, the Wolfer

By George Gilbert

Author of "One Bell O," etc.

CHAPTER XXXII.

OLD JUBE'S LAST SHOT.

THE pink eyes of the albino dilated, then seemed to narrow—sharpen to pin points, as he whirled to face the old outlier, whose face was a mask of fury. Martin's own guns pointed down. He could read in his captor's eyes that a move toward raising them meant death.

"You strike fast, Martin—two daid below; two up here!"

Martin did not say a word. He was estimating his chances with the agile mind of the trained and educated thinker. He had entered with two guns going; he had fired eight shots; he had four left, perhaps, but two if the man from whom he had stolen the guns had done as most skilled gunmen are apt to do in actual practice—leave an empty chamber in each gun for the hammer to rest on in safety.

"Drop those guns; I want whatever papers you've got; there may be some that I need," old Jube said, mastering himself with an effort. He was holding the ruby-hued eyes of the cornered man. Jube's sunken but still keen orbs did not waver.

Martin's guns clattered down.

Jessie was still.

Martin's pose turned to cringing: "Don't shoot, Bossimier; maybe we can come to some agreement; I don't want to die."

"No one does, Martin. You've killed Bossimier men, though, an' we always stick t'gether. I ain't got any religion but t' stick t' my men," His voice was level, ominous. He repeated: "Give me any papers you've got."

"And then?" asked Martin whiningly.

"I'm tired talking——"

Like the stroke of a sidewinder Martin's right hand knocked the old outlier's gun muzzle aside. The bullet spattered against the wall of the cave. Martin's right hand still kept the muzzle turned; his left sought the big knife in old Jube's broad belt. As they came apart, old Jube's gun thundered as the albino's arm was snapped forward.

So close together were they at the crisis of the scene that neither had a show. The big slug from old Jube's gun tore away Martin's heart, but the impulse Martin had given to the big bowie knife lasted long enough to drive it into old Jube's neck halfway to the hilt. The two fell forward, locked in the death embrace.

Jessie, half mad with terror, leaped from the pallet of furs and sped out of doors. A horse was there, the big rawboned horse of old Jube. She made a flying mount, got a firm grip upon the animal's sides with her heels, lifted him, and he sped swiftly up the valley and out of it.

Jessie had no idea where she was going. She did not know just why she had been held prisoner. She had no means of knowing that rescuers were close at hand or that foes were even closer.

She knew but one thing—she was free. Behind were the captors, those that had been alive and those that were alive. She did not know of the punchers riding to her rescue from the lower ranch lands.

She did know that she had a good horse under her; that there was a dim trail to follow, and that once in the open, with the landmarks to view and full daylight to show the way, she stood a chance of riding to the Ax. That was enough. Lifting the old rawbone, she urged him to the limit of his speed. Game, a good horse, he had served well a bad master. Now he was to serve a good mistress to an end that he could not see!

CHAPTER XXXIII.

NEARING HOME AGAIN.

SWEEPING over range after range, the Lobo King, the Queen, and their dread pack of grim followers hunted, sweeping a clean path. Once the impulse was on them to move, nothing stopped them. They swept around cow camps as they neared the Ax, taking toll of calf and colt.

Everywhere they went they threw the country into consternation. Now they were killing and leaving what they killed, half eaten or entirely uneaten, save that they drank the blood.

Reports came in that they had attacked single men, caught at unawares, escaping each time without being shot at, owing, men said, to the devilish craft of their terrible leader. They did not pull down humans, but they menaced them.

Mothers bade their children remain indoors at dusk. The pack, passing like magic, seemed in a dozen places at once, so swift did rumor and report fly about. No doubt many a wolfish foray by other packs was laid to the King's pack, after the manner of those frightened by frontier mishaps. Yet it is certain that most of the exploits charged against the Lobo King and the Queen and pack were genuine products of vulpine craft and cunning.

As they neared the Ax, the wolves ceased to indulge in side hunts and drove straight forward. The King lusted for the fat calves of the Ax; perchance he lusted for big game again, and for a chance to pull down the hated man thing of the tent above the Ax. Perchance he merely wanted to feed full on lesser fare and then lie on the throne again and bask in sunlight as the orb of day swung up over the sweet valley of the Mondon and brought out from rim-rock pine and spruce subtle odors, coming on soughing winds from distant ranges.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

CORNERED.

ROUNDING the upper trail and turning down, toward where the two pines were, Heck Thornton, Deuce Munster, and List Zimmler were anxious for the outcome. They had thought that they had heard shots in that direction, then the hurried passing of a horse. At the valley's end they found horse sign, leading up onto the higher levels still. Heck did not scan it sharply then.

They swung down and led their horses aside from the main trail, to-

ward that other horse. Heck, reading sign as they went, pointed out that five horses had gone from the main trail toward the cave, whereas but one horse remained. He debated with them the meaning of it all.

They saw the cave, silent, the tarp down, as it had fallen after Jessie's escape. They saw the tracks of the single horse, very fresh, leading up and out of the valley.

"That looks like old Jube's hoss made those tracks; I remember his sign—how he reached up so far with his hind laigs when he was hitting the high spots," Heck told them. "Same sign we saw going out above."

"I don't like this," Munster put in. "Let's see what's in that cave."

"They may be ambushed in there," Zimmler objected, his innate cowardice mastering him in the pinch.

"All right; we'll go in alone, then," and Heck drew his guns.

"I'm a yallowback, but I'll go—first," Zimmler declared, taking the lead.

"That takes more grit than we've got; we're not scared," Heck praised him as they came to the concealing tarp.

"Yank it down; now, in together," Heck ordered.

The tarp came rattling down, and they leaped inward.

Zimmler stumbled over a body. The light streamed in, with the tarp gone. Then they took in the disordered cave, the four dead bodies, and the pallet of furs, all in disarray.

"Two Bossimiers daid, and Old Jube an' Martin!" Zimmler said, his voice low. "Risky business; that makes four, all similar."

Heck strode to old Jube's body and searched it. He found nothing unusual. He searched the coat of Martin, taking from the inside pocket a bulk of legal papers, tied up in red tape and marked with imposing seals.

"These may give us a hint at what he's doin' in here, plotting with old Jube against Jessie," Deuce encouraged him as he pocketed the papers.

"But where's Jessie?"

"There's her hat," said Deuce, pointing to it on the floor where it had been thrown.

"So it is—then she's been in the cave."

"Could she've rode that hoss off? It was old Jube's American rawbone, all right," put in Deuce.

"She might've, when the fight was goin' on in here," returned Heck.

"Then she's above us; we can run that sign; she won't go far."

"I think I hear some one," Zimmler warned, and then their horses nickered.

Zimmler peered out. He drew back at once. "Bossimiers, Claude, Park Luroy, and a lot more——"

Heck and Munster peered out. The Bossimiers, on the trail, evidently having just ridden down from above, were looking at the four horses and debating what their appearance there meant.

"That's an Ax hoss," Claude Bossimier was saying, pointing to Munster's horse.

"That's that skunk Zimmler's flea bit," Luroy decided.

"An' that's that wolfer's smoke hoss," another pointed out.

"I heard shots—a hoss went hell for leather," Claude declared "The echoes brought that much noise clear down around that lower turn."

"Old Jube may be in the cave an' know about it," one suggested.

"Let's see—Munster and that wolfer and List may be hiding in the cave."

"Then they must've met up with your granddad," Luroy pointed out persistently.

"I guess we better see the inside of that cave," said Claude, starting forward.

Heck, Deuce and List tensed for the break that seemed inevitable. The Bossimiers were seen to loosen guns in holsters, and lean forward, preparing

to make their horses face the grade leading up to the cave.

Suddenly Claude whirled his horse about and cried out loudly: "The punchers are comin' up from below; ride; put daylight behind you, men."

They rode then, followed by a streaming volley from the ready guns of the trio in the cave mouth. Several Bossimiers were seen to reel in their saddles as the lethal gun fire rolled, and then they had vanished over the upper lip of the trail and were gone.

As the Bossimiers disappeared, Heck, List and Deuce raced for their horses. Once in the saddle, they looked for the oncoming punchers from below, but saw none. What they heard was echoes—far in advance of the approaching cavalcade that so evidently had heard the shooting and was coming at a swift pace.

The trio had time to emerge from the cave, mount, and work their way back to the main trail before the punchers came sweeping up from below.

Osier and Werner reported everything they had in charge of well cared for. The women and children had been warned out of the valley. The Bossimiers had only squatters' rights in there, at best.

It was agreed that if they cornered the Bossimiers, they could round them up, as they had enough forces at hand to overcome them.

"What I want now, more than that, is to get Jessie Preston," Heck reminded them. "She'll be with them or ahaid of them," Heck judged, after he had told Osier, Werner, and range men with them what they had found in the cave and of the sign of old Jube's horse leading from it.

"Our best play is to follow after the Bossimiers right now, readin' the sign like Indians. If we can see where that American hat rack of old Jube's turns aside, follow it. If we can get hold of a Bossimier alive, he'll tell us a few, wide an' pretty," Deuce spoke sharply. "Ride, men!"

Leadership was entrusted to Heck Thornton, as the best trailer among all those splendid sign readers. Now the cavalcade swept up the trail and out of the end of the valley.

The ground was broken up there. Every game trail and crossing place for range cattle was known to the Bossimiers who so often had rustled cattle for themselves into or out of the uninhabited territory above their own lonely vale. It was realized that the pursued had already a good start, but the riders who carried law in the saddle with them were determined, for once, to run a Bossimier trail to the bitter end.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE BOSSIMIERS SPLIT.

RIDING at the head of the Bossimier clan from the valley's end out into the broken country above, Claud Bossimier saw the well-known sign of old Jube's rawbone American horse. He had no reason at first to think that any one but old Jube was astride that old distance veteran. The rawbone had been a distance horse in his day, a steeplechaser. Old Jube had never raced him, but had made him accustomed to the hardships and sparse fare of the cow country. The old fellow was hard as nails, enduring. Old Jube always had favored him when possible, getting oats for him when he could. He was always in good condition, and did just enough work to keep him in good condition.

Jessie Preston had given the old horse his head when she had started him out of the valley. A good rider, she had no difficulty in keeping atop the horse, although old Jube's stirrups were long for her. His long, reaching strides were familiar to the Bossimiers, and Claude soon picked them out, even as they raced along.

"Old Jube's ahaid; he was supposed to've met us up at the haid of the valley," Claude told the men, after they had ridden a ways and felt it was safe to pull up.

"I wonder what that wolfer, Munster, and Zimmler were doing in that cave?" Luroy asked.

"Well, they didn't get old Jube, that's sure," Claude said.

"Who was supposed t' be guarding that woman in there?"

"Vint and Peck."

"We passed their hosses on the way up, wandering back, an' that hoss we think that pilgrim, Martin, took."

"I'm all in the dark, but old Jube is ahaid, an' we ought t' follow. If we'd gone up near the cave we'd found where he sent Vint an' Peck off somewhere afoot with that woman; he's got lot's o' hide outs we don't know of. But it's danged funny he don't stop none."

"Yes, old Jube is in a pressin' sweat," Luroy agreed.

"That's the trouble; the older he gets, the more biggoty he gets," Claude grumbled. "But we've got t' get out o' here, that's whatever."

They set off now at a fairly stiff pace, considering the rough going. But as they went on it became apparent to them that whoever was on the old American rawbone was not used to the country, for the old horse was seen to have taken hard grades, ridden into and out of draws that the Bossimiers avoided in their trailing of cattle up there. This puzzled them. But they had scant time to think on this, for they knew that behind them the range forces were coming.

A division arose among them. They bunched to argue on a high ridge between two draws. The ridge was timbered, and they were back among the trees. From there they could command a view of the back trail for a good six miles. Ahead of them they could see the length of the long draw.

They had not gained on the old rawbone. He was known to be a stayer for distance, and had been innured by old Jube to hill work and rough usage.

"I don't like this," Luroy began to argue. "Those punchers are apt t' head us off from the north country any time; we're just going it blind, racing after old Jube's hoss."

There were growls and hot words from a number of others along the same line; Luroy had been building up a following for himself for months, foreseeing that old Jube's power was bound to wane with the passing of time, while Claude's drinking bouts had caused him to bring trouble down on the pang.

"Well, what d'you want?" Claude demanded.

"I think old Jube can take care of himself, and we can do the same. He's of aige."

A chorus of assent from Luroy's friends greeted the appeal to self-interest.

"Jube may think he knows what he's doing, but be hanged if I know," Monte Red, another of the Luroy men offered.

Claude was puzzled. They had halted there to blow the horses after the hard upgrade work and to tighten cinches. The argument had followed as a result of a moment of idleness.

Claude could see that a break would split the gang in half, just when it was essential that the men stay together. His usual hot-headed desire for trouble was replaced by a trace of Bossimier craft.

"Let's ride this sign for a while, picking out the easy part of the traveling as far as we can and cutting the sign t' get the general direction, as much as is needed."

"No; I quit right here; old Jube can take care of himself." This, from Luroy, was final, Claude sensed. He was ready for a few seconds to force a break, but kept from it. Then he had an idea.

"Old Jube might be wounded, an' not able to pick his way right."

"No horse would jam up so many bad grades and twist around this a way unless some one was sendin' him," Monte Red objected again. "That hoss is being rode by some one that can ride, but it ain't old Jube."

"I guess we won't argue here much longer; look back there!" said Luroy.

The cloud of trail murk back there was plain enough for any one to see. The bobbing objects at its base were numerous and riding close-bunched, showing fine horsemanship.

Without a word of argument, Luroy turned his horse due north and about a third of the gang rode after him, followed by howls of rage from the others. Some men upon whom Luroy had depended remained with Claude.

"Those yallowbacks have got the most six-gun feed, too," Claude Bossimier reminded his own friends bitterly. He had intended to have a division of the cartridges at some good opportunity, but in the hurry of events, no opportunity had offered. Claude himself had a belt full of shells; some of the others had only a few rounds, beyond what was in their guns. Some of the men had rifles, though.

They whirled now and followed again the lead of the old rawbone of Jube's. There had been no rendezvous appointed, and Claude, never a good planner, felt the need for the brain power of the crafty old gang leader.

In a general way the chase took them northwest. They saw the pursuers behind them sometimes, and knew they were making a sure thing of the pursuit by the way they kept to the trail, often making cut-offs and dodging around the ends of swells in a way that told of experience in the saddle behind them—experience that could save time and distance and yet keep to the trail.

It was noon when Claude became aware that the horses of part of his men were weakening, and he faced the necessity of either making a stand to delay pursuit or having some of his men ravel the trail out, in the effort to get away by themselves. He elected to adopt the first course, and gathered a great deal of the ammunition, at a brief halt they made to tighten cinches. Now he took up the rear guard, sending the men with the poorer horses ahead. They were off the trail of the old rawbone horse now, but knew or thought they knew, where they could cut the sign again on a swell about a mile ahead. They waited on top of a ridge, and, as the first of the pursuers appeared in sight, they began to throw rifle lead back at them. Now Bossimier got an idead of the quality of the opposition that had been stirred up against the gang, for he saw the number of the riders in pursuit, and his glass showed him brands and faces that he knew.

"We've got t' let old Jube do as he pleases," he had to admit. "That bunch mean business; we'll stop them here and then pull our freight."

The riders behind had swung down and sought cover. The range was long, but Heck, using a rifle a Three Bar Three man had brought, began to make sharp play with it, hitting two Bossimiers in succession.

Dropping over the ridge, Claude and his followers, instead of riding to where they might expect to find the sign they had been following, swung down the trough below and spurted for the cover of some fairly dense growth close at hand.

This maneuver had the desired effect, for Thornton and his men, having noted the general direction of the chase, and feeling that this small skirmish was for delaying purposes, when the fire in front slackened, rode to cut off the gang directly on the other side of the ridge.

So, when they topped the ridge, after a hard, plunging dash up the grade, they saw no signs of the Bossimiers

and, for the time, no sign to run. The ruse of the Bossimiers had worked well, and they had made a badly needed gain.

The Bossimiers, however, had thrown away some needed lead, and had lost part of their forces. Osier, leading an equal number of punchers, was at that moment pounding along after the deserters from Claude's ranks with fair prospects of coming up to them and forcing a fight before they could get back to Branchton, whither they had swung for, as soon as free from observation by the crowd they had left in the lurch.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

JESSIE'S RIDE.

WHEN first she had escaped from the cave, Jessie Preston had had no idea save to get away from the place of horrors as speedily as possible. She had enough general sense of direction to turn the old distance horse out of the upper end of the valley. She had enough will power to keep to the saddle and send the old horse along.

The old rawbone, deceiving, cat-hamed, ewe-necked, a bone yard, his digestive organs in perfect condition, his heart untouched, his wind sound, accustomed to carrying heavy old Jube, made easy work of the woman now atop him. Jessie was a light rider; she swayed with the horse and was as thistledown in the saddle. Light on the rein, assured in poise, she generated confidence in the horse.

One thing was against her—she did not have experience in riding in such rough country. She had ridden in more level lands a great deal. She loved a horse. She could stick to the saddle, but she did not know how to find her way up there in that broken region. She had one idea, to keep to a fairly direct course, and she did that. The course was too straightforward for her own good, it seemed, yet its unexpected directness fooled her pursuers, who for so long thought that the rawbone was being ridden by old Jube.

Stopping to tighten cinches, Jessie shortened the stirrups and thus eased the ache of her limbs, caused by trying to keep her seat over rough going by instinctive flexing of leg muscles. The old horse did not try to buck her off. He fought the bit a few times, but in the main he ran true to his training, steadily and without seeming effort. Jessie had too much sense to overtax him; she called for steady, even, mile-devouring lope and that was the gait the old rawbone liked best of all.

The stops the Bossimiers made to argue, the stop to stand off the range forces, all helped Jessie, although she did not know it then. She never saw a sign of pursuit all that morning. The route she was taking had led her onto unfamiliar ground; she knew she was lost, but she hoped to find some place where she could get assistance soon.

What Jessie did not know was this—the region whither she was fleeing was devoid of settled habitation. There was no good grazing, and no mineral ever had been found there. It was one of those areas that are rather avoided by people in general, because of lack of good feed for cattle and good water. People might pass through it, as the Bossimiers did going into or out of their valley's upper end; but they had no reason for stopping there. The few little pockets of grass were not enough to attract general attention—the deer nipped them down in passing.

Jessie was hungry by noon. She had found water once. Satisfied that she had ridden as far north as she should ride, she began to let the old horse take his time more and more and swung over to the west, the sun guiding her. She thought she might be well above the Ax by now, but had no means of knowing. The way was all strange to her. Fortunately there was no real

desert to reckon with; she had but to endure hunger and fatigue, she thought, and all would come out well in the end.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

HECK MEETS WITH DELAY.

EVERY man in the pursuers' ranks hand picked his top horse for that ride. Grulla was a fine long-distance goer, and Deuce Munster had one of his best rough-country horses under him. Yet the Bossimiers were noted for the excellence of their horseflesh. Old Jube was a master hand at picking fine horses, either for money or by "strategy." He could trade the average cowman out of his eyeteeth. The horses the Bossimiers ran in were best.

Where Jessie was, Heck Thornton and the others had no means of knowing. But Heck had made a shrewd guess that she was on the lone horse that had been ridden from the cave mouth. Seeing the Bossimiers take that trail, he felt sure they were pursuing Jessie. The political divisions among the pursued he had no means of fathoming. He knew this—that the Bossimiers had kidnapped Jessie; that they were before him and that it was best to keep right after them. As long as they were kept in motion they were not apt to harm her, from lack of time and because they would not want to leave plain evidence of a murder committed by them when a posse was at their very heels, with at least a fair chance of forcing them to stand and fight.

After the skirmish on the ridge top, Heck was at fault for a time. He was puzzled then to find that the trail of the single horse, that had seemed to lure the Bossimiers on, was no longer being followed by them. Picking up the sign again, in the thicket where the Bossimiers had ridden aside, Heck was surprised to find that the sign of the rawbone was missing from the medley of horse tracks.

He decided to stick to the main trail of the crowd, as he reasoned it out to the others:

"Whatever is in their minds, our main hold is to keep after them. I'll follow the sign of that lone hoss; you fellows keep after the main herd o' Bossimiers. They may have Jessie with them, and that lone hoss may be carrying some woman of the Bossimiers. We haven't followed the sign foot by foot, but have cut around and read it on the high spots. They might have caught that lone hoss and traded Jessie off it and onto one of their own horses and sent it off to one side for a decoy at some place where we were off the sign and cutting to make distance on them."

No meeting place was appointed; it was decided that Heck should use his own judgment and Deuce Munster, now in charge of the main group of pursuers, was in command from then on, until Heck either returned to them or sent them word of any change in plan he thought might be necessary.

As the sun swung up and was overhead at noon, Heck Thornton began to have a new idea of the staying powers of that old rawbone. Grulla was gaining on the old distance horse, it is true. Once he had a glimpse of him, pounding along, on a distant ridge, at a steady clip—too far away for Heck to make out who was atop the old fellow. He clawed at the clips of the field glass case, but got it out too late to catch the fleeing one in focus before the glimpse was over.

With this sure clew, Heck urged Grulla to the utmost to the top of that ridge, down the other side, and then one of those accidents of the chase in the outlands befell him—Grulla stepped into a gopher hole, came down for a heavy fall, and Heck, stunned, lost track of time for hours. When he awakened, it was mid-afternoon; Grulla was pitifully lame. Heck himself felt

weak, but could have traveled. The horse, however, could not respond. Heck decided to cut across country toward the Ax at once. He thought he could not get another horse short of there, unless he met some of their party on the way.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

HUNGER.

HAVING swung far to the northwest, led there by the vagaries of their desires, the Lobo King and Queen and pack suffered hunger. They did not suffer the extreme hunger that grips the pack in winter, when they must go for days on the strength of the kills of other days, living indeed upon the very marrow in their bones. But they suffered, none the less, the little hunger, the hunger of the open weather when game is hard to get. They veered into a desert stretch and found there two wild burros, which they slew and consumed to the last shred. They had a brief period of luxury in a little desert valley suddenly invaded by a host of pocket gophers migrating and caught off-guard. But these were not sufficient to keep the powerful pack fed up to the top notch of sufficiency.

Now they veered southeast again, and this time the Lobo King turned his head surely for the throne and the Valley of the Mondon. He yearned again to taste of the warm blood of calves or colts and to try again to pull down big game.

This afternoon, when the Bossimiers, in two parties, were fleeing, when the women of the Bossimier Valley were making ready to move under threat of force, when Jessie Preston, fleeing, had finally become lost, the King and Queen, with their gaunt pack behind them, were swinging down toward the top of the Valley of the Mondon, silently, furtively. They did not yelp on a trail; they hoped to find one soon. The great hunger had not touched them, but the little hunger, such as comes in the "moon of falling leaves," was upon them.

By some strange freak of nature, the game had gone from their range and the giant pack raced through a country seemingly devoid of red-meated quarry. Yet, tireless in their speedy lope, they pushed on, for under the shoulders of the highlands along the Mondon were herds—perchance big game!

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE AX OUTFIT REMAINS.

JESSIE had left with the Ax outfit a nice collection of bake goods. She had "held out" on the boys for several days before starting to go to court at Antelope. And she had exerted herself when it was possible to do so without detection, in piling up extra cookies and doughnuts, that her boys might have a supply while she was away.

Dazee Phillips, elevated or degraded to the cook's job upon her departure, dealt out these dainties with impartial hand. That is, he ate all he, personally, could hold and divided what was left impartially.

The result was that Dazee hardly slept that first night and was awake early the next morning. He it was that heard, therefore, the six-gun battering at the Ax door and came hurrying out, fearing they were to have visitors who might consume some of the precious dainties. But it was Spike Nealis, of the Three Bar Three, with the news that riders were out to clean up the Bossimiers.

"Your boss didn't consider you-all good enough to come to the ball, so his orders was to round up every haid of hoss stock you've got and see that no Bossimier gets any fresh mounts."

"Don't we get in on the roundup of Bossimiers?" Dazee asked.

"You do not. We-all being close at hand, get first pickin's."

"That's a devil of a note!" said Dazee.

But Nealis was already riding. Dazee whacked on the bunk-house door till he had Mustard Joines and the rest awake and told them the news.

"Those orders don't sound t' me; I'm goin' to ride with our boys. somewhere," Joines told them. He was in charge now that Munster was gone.

"Better cull that over in your empty haid," Dazee objected. "Deuce knows what he's doing. One thing's sure; if the Bossimiers hit the Ax on the run with no one home, they'll pick up a fine lot o' fresh hosses an' run off the rest for spite, and then they'll get away into the north country with a flyin' start and be gone for good."

Joines reluctantly decided to remain at the Ax. The Ax men were boiling at the thought that their cook should be subjected to any indignities at the hands of the Bossimier crowd.

"Why, she's ace high, and that's whatever," Mustard made his oration. "No finer lady ever lived. Even t' smell of one of her crullers is equal t' being elected t' congress, and as for her flapjacks—why, neckties and umbersolls may be the food of the gods, but they ain't t' be compared to one of Missus Preston's flapdoodle cakes."

CHAPTER XL.

THE PIT HOLE.

THAT distant view that Heck Thornton caught of Jessie, not knowing that it was she, was the last that she saw of any one that seemed to her like a pursuer that day. She, like Heck, had caught but a fleeting glimpse of him. Unseen by the Bossimiers, earlier in the day, she had seen them pursuing her. She was puzzled to find but one man after her. She had determined not to be overtaken by any one, until she could come to some habitation of people she could trust.

Jessie hoped to cut the Valley of the Mondon by turning westward. She kept the old rawbone shacking along slowly till it was dark. She intended then to find a patch of grass, and let him nip, without unsaddling. She feared to take off the saddle, because she did not know the disposition of the horse and feared that she might not be able to saddle him alone, knowing that horses of the cow country often play strange tricks on new owners.

She found, indeed, the grass she wished for and another drink for herself and horse. She was very hungry, but she knew that she must go on without food. Her clothing was torn from oft-repeated smashing through outland growths that had caught and slashed. She was full of courage, however, and determined to make it back to the Ax in the morning.

Jessie determined to get some sleep. She tied the rawbone to a tree limb and tightened his cinches, to let him know that he must keep the saddle on longer. He grunted displeasure and tried to blow, but she prodded him with her heel. She felt that the saddle would remain in place. She felt sorry for the horse, and knew that he would relish a roll, but she did not dare give it to him.

Jessie was not afraid. She had been told that nothing in the wilds about the Ax would hurt any human beings, unless a grizzly might come onto the range.

Jessie jerked awake to find the horse snorting in terror.

Away off to the north she could hear a sound that carried terror with it. She had never heard that full-tongued cry of the hunting pack of wolves. But that fearful clamor, unique in nature, carried its own threat of terror. Like the harsh, dry rattle of a buzztail, the roar of the charging grizzly, the roar of a cyclone, the hunting cry of the Lobo King and his pack spread horror as far

as the vibrations of it on the night air carried.

Jessie felt that the best way to be sure of the horse was to swing to him and get aboard. This she did the more easily as the rawbone actually seemed to wish to be under the human burden to which he was accustomed. In the saddle Jessie spoke quietly to the horse and he steadied. He was game, good, faithful to the limit of his endurance. With all his other faults, old Jube had been good to his horse and the rawbone had confidence in human kind. He feared the wolves, though. Instinct taught him to fear the blood-letting beasts that had hunted his ancestors on the steppes of Siberia, the sands of Arabia, and in the Ardennes.

The howling pack passed to the right. The night was still. Jessie felt that the wolves had not caught the scent of her and the horse. She had been told that the wolves would not attack human beings. Yet she felt safer on the horse.

The clamor of the pack died away, so far as Jessie could hear. Yet the horse continued to be fretful and snorted, stamping. He had grazed, digested his food, and had had some water.

Jessie let the reins go loose and the horse moved on a little, slowly. He found grass, but did not nip to contentment. Rather, he took a bite here and there and went on uneasily. In fact, he still heard the wolves, out of reach of human hearing, but within range of his own.

Jessie had no way of knowing the hour. The sky was overcast. She hoped to miss disaster by being carried under a tree or over a rock. She let the horse go at will, trying to keep him going west. She trusted that morning would show her some landmark or at least the sun, to check up her course by.

Now came to her ears the sound of the hunting pack, below her. It came, louder, louder. The horse snorted in fright and was about to bolt. She checked him. The pack passed off to her right; she heard the sudden snarls of triumph and shivered. It meant death to some creature!

The pack, indeed, had pulled down a half-grown deer, hardly a mouthful to the lean wolves. The pack had rended this bit of prey instantly and were licking their chops over the cracked marrow bones within a few moments after the Lobo King had headed the deer and slashed its throat open with his huge, gleaming fangs.

This kill, indeed, had stayed their hunger, but had not satisfied it. It had given the wolves strength for a greater effort.

The horse continued to fret, and once or twice it sought to bolt. Jessie, fearing disaster, held him down.

Now she heard the pack again, this time close at hand, in full cry. Into the vulpine chorus had sounded a new note of fierceness. Jessie sensed it, without knowing what it was.

The Lobo King had scented big game again! Yes, big game! He knew that the horse they were trailing carried a rider.

Now they came leaping forward, at the very heels of the rawboned horse, eyes gleaming, teeth champing, jaws slavering.

But a touch of fear of man held them back. The Lobo King had always feared a man on horseback. Men on horses had chased him, shot at him, laid traps for him, cast cunning nooses at him. Once he had been dragged by a man who had roped him, and had only escaped because a fortunate chafing of the rope on jagged stones had cut it until he had been enabled to snap it in twain and get away. Yet the horse was moving away from them; the rider was making no hostile motions.

The pack kept away a little, but pursued. The rawbone began to make better speed. The country seemed

open. Jessie let him go. The wolves closed in. Jessie shouted. They drew back, fearful of the human voice. Finding this to be so, Jessie began to sing. This had its effect, but eventually the wolves closed in again. Then Jessie thought of her matches. She had a few in the pocket of her waist. These she now lighted, one by one. At the sight of the dreaded fire, even at the sight of that tiny bit of it that a match made, the wolves snarled and drew back. Each match frightened them a little; each time a match burned out, she heard them closing in again. The horse reared and became all but unmanageable at times. Once or twice wolves leaped at his hams and then he screamed and bounded forward.

Jessie wished for a gun. Had she been able to dismount and build a big fire, she would have been safe. But to stop meant a gamble with death, for she might not find wood upon stopping, and even if she did stop where shrubs or trees were, they might be such as were hard to ignite and she might lose the horse and be left, afoot, and without matches, to be pulled down.

The persistent behavior of the wolves alarmed her. She never had heard of wolves so fierce and determined to attack a human being before.

As for the Lobo King, he would have charged home at once, but that the big game was in the saddle. He feared this horse and rider, even as he drove them onward.

The horse did not lope fast, for Jessie kept him in. He made fair time, even in the dark. Jessie prayed he would not stumble, for if he did——

The dawn came suddenly, a wind tearing apart clouds that had kept the light back till the last moment. Then Jessie could see that they were again in broken country. She was ready to fall off the horse from exhaustion. Only her supreme will and grit had kept her in the saddle during those hours when the leaping, slavering terrors of the wild had pressed in on either side, from behind and in front. The night had been a long nightmare of fear and suffering.

Now the horse saw the wolves, that, contrary to the usual custom of wolves, did not grow cowardly with the daylight. These wolves seemed to be driven onward by some implacable purpose! They ran silently now, except for the champing of teeth and the slavering sounds.

The horse, seeing the wolves, had yet another terror added to his former ones. He had gone to the limit of his endurance; his nerves had been shredded to bits during those dark hours when the wolves had nipped at his hams; he had screamed in terror till he could scream no more. The horse was in that state of panic where a horse loses control and will not be controlled. He was gripped by the panic that makes the wild stallion cast himself over a cliff rather than be roped, that makes a racer bolt through a fence rather than finish. The rawbone was dying on his feet gamely, truly, and now the wolves, before his very eyes, slavering, grinning, leaping, closing in, struck a chilly terror to his great, loyal heart, and he came to a last fury of living rage.

The rawbone got the bit, and bolted!

The jerk of his mighty onward bound of panic almost unseated stanch Jessie Preston. But the big hollow in his back helped her; the heritage of courage that was hers helped her. She stuck, somehow, and the horse leaped, crashing forward.

Now the pack was behind; the wind sang in her ears; the Lobo King flashed up even with the rawbone's withers, leaped at her, missed. The Queen leaped, just missed! As well try to control a tornado as to control that old horse in his agony of panic!

Again the wolves drew up, the King on one side, the terrible Queen on the other. A wolf sprang from behind,

snarling. The old horse, feeling the fiery breath of him on his hams, gave a mighty series of bounds that all but unseated Jessie. As she steadied again, the old horse's feet shot over the edge of rim rock, and he fell, landing with his forefeet doubled under him. He rolled over, as the woman threw herself to one side free and unhurt.

The old rawbone was down, now, in the bottom of the pit hole! He was innert from the shock of his fall. He never would run again; his leg was fractured. The rim rock above was ringed with grinning, horrible faces of wolves, that had drawn back on their well-padded feet from the deadly verge of the death hole.

The King, muzzle in the air, sounded a rallying cry: "Follow me!" Then he wheeled and made off toward the rock cleft that would give safe entrance to the rocky labyrinth and the pit hole from the subterranean passage.

Jessie, thinking they had gone and that she had escaped, relaxed. She did not know where she was. At no time after the light had strengthened, had the old horse loped close enough to the rim of the valley of the Mondon to give her a glimpse of the Ax below.

She was in a rock-bound prison, with only one outlet, and that soon was to be blocked by howling, snarling shapes, lead by the master of the long trails, the terror who lusted now for big game —the Lobo King!

CHAPTER XLI.

AX MEN ON GUARD.

DARKNESS found the Bossimiers still moving. Twice during the afternoon had Deuce Munster compelled them to stop and throw away lead in the effort to halt pursuit. Several of the pursuers had been wounded; three more Bossimiers had fallen.

Claude Bossimier felt more and more the need of heady old Jube, who, with Luroy, Vint, and Peck, the old man's familiars, had done a great deal of the gang's headwork in time past. Dogged courage he had, brute lack of fear, but the long-headed planning of the old leader he did not possess.

At the back of his head, however, was one good plan—the procuring of remounts. He knew that below Branchton the riders were aroused and the ranches on the alert. He knew that the Ax had fine horses. If the Ax had sent most of its men afield, the remmainder might be rushed and the horses taken there. Or they might even raid at night and get away without a fight. Claude Bossimier knew where the Ax horse pasture was—a nice flat above the ranch house, where the saddle band was wont to run under the leadership of a wise old princess, belled and gentle.

So now Bossimier veered toward the Mondon, plugging his horses into the night persistently. He knew it was the last chance. If they got the Ax horses, leaving their own tired ones, they would be far into the upper country before the pursuers could get fresh mounts from below. This had been at the back of Claude's head all afternoon and now, at night, the plan emerged full fledged.

Bossimier knew better than to break for the Ax direct. That would give the pursuers a clew to his intentions. They, leaving the sign, would cut across at once for the ranch and perhaps head him off, for there would have to be some delay, fighting off the Ax men at the ranch. Therefore Bossimier waited till dark to make that break across country, with the Ax as his objective.

He knew the lay of the land well—knew how to drift across the country in the dark, for had he not drifted many a stolen herd thus?

So now Bossimier began his side march. Fortune favored in one respect —the pursuers had not brought lanterns. Even that small help was to be denied them. Of course it was pos-

sible to follow the sign slowly with lights. But there was no trail; the hunt was across difficult country.

Bossimier himself led, gaining confidence with every mile. He thought that his ruse was going to work.

The drop into the valley from the east, where the grade was fairly easy at the point he selected to make the sliding drop, took about all the stamina the horses of the pursued had left. Their heads were down as they blew at the bottom. Yet, cinches must be tightened and progress made! After a time Bossimier became aware that no horses were grazing where horses should have been grazing.

"I don't like this," he told his men. "I'm goin' t' go down t' the Ax and scout some."

He left them with orders not to smoke or even strike a match, and to fire at anything that looked like a bunch of riders.

Bossimier scouted down the well-defined trail leading toward the Ax. He saw the light in the bunk house, and that seemed bad to him, at that hour, when all should have been asleep, except perhaps the night herd.

Leaving his horse, Bossimier crept down to where he knew the Ax home corral was, the big one.

Lying on the ground, looking up, he got the dozing puncher between him and the sky as Mustard Joines, atop his steady top hoss, jogged the rounds of the corral fence. He waited—heard some one on the other side singing. Then he heard the horses inside the corral snorting. A big bar of golden light down at the bunk house told of the door being flung open. Sounds of subdued revelry came forth!

"The Ax is all awake, r'aring t' go," was Bossimier's thought.

He knew the futility of trying to surprise the outfit then. He heard Dazee Phillips, the youngster, arouse Joines.

Bossimier went back to his waiting men with this news. Desperation counseled an attack upon the Ax; common sense told them that this would surely tell every one in the region where they were, as even if they defeated the Ax, they would miss some of the Ax riders and they would spread the news of the fight and the pursuers then would have a hot trail out of the Ax.

"We've got t' hide up somewhere," Bossimier told them. "An' hide up complete. There's an old hide-out of old Jube's above the Ax—lot of underground passages, that old Jube told Woodin t' use when he was out t' spy on the earlier in this game. You remember it, Uldyke?"

Uldyke remembered it well. "Sure! Smelled like a wolf den last time I was there, looking for Woodin. I've often wondered if wolves mightn't've accounted for Woodin when he disappeared.

"No wolves around here ever pulled down a human. Woodin had his gun, didn't he? Besides, there's enough men here t' whop the devil out o' all the wolves ever made."

"I guess that's so."

"Once we get out of this valley, over the rim, we'll find some feed for the hosses. They've drunk down here. They've got t' rest and feed. I figure we've got the best chance gettin' up there an' watching over the rim. We can see every hoof that stirs down here from up there. One man on the rim can watch the back trail. The rest can sleep. There's chimneys in that rock hole that will carry off smoke from a dry wood fire so it won't be seen from below. We c'n cook something."

"Better stick t' water an' cold grub," Uldyke advised. "An' go on north till we cain't go any farther."

But this counsel of perfection had no appeal for the others. They were weary. Then, too, every mile north took them away from the women left behind in their own valley.

"They won't hit our sign in here till morning; we've got time to hide out up there; maybe send the horses away and all get into that cave."

CHAPTER XLII.

HECK SUSPECTS.

NURSING lame Grulla along, Heck Thornton made for the Ax. Accustomed to night travel, accustomed to meet wolves on their own ground under cover of the dark, he walked, albeit his heels were chafed by his boots from so much and such unusual exercise.

Heck made his way slowly, yet he made progress. After a time Grulla became able to carry him a little, although it seemed a shame to ride the good horse when he was so lame. The lurching, hobbling gait of Grulla kept Heck awake. Once the direction was set, the loyal horse kept it fairly well.

It was hard work riding a horse so lame that way at night. Only a desperate need made it excusable for either man or horse.

Heck's eyes, capable of good vision at night, were on a constant strain. After he had lost sight of the rawboned horse he had seen nothing else of interest, and during the long hours of the darkness he heard nothing. It was all grim, deadly, wrenching work.

Heck managed to get his horse down into the valley of the Mondon well before dawn. He noted with pleasure the light in the bunk house. He gave warning of his approach, and soon had Mustard Joines and Dazee Phillips out, explaining how alert they had been all night.

Grulla, turned into the little corral, had not spirit enough left to roll. He limped away, groaning at every lurching step.

Heck at once borrowed a horse and swung up the valley. An uneasiness that he could not control was driving him forward.

Well above the Ax the horse under Heck whinned in a peculiar manner. Heck knew it for the inviting call a horse makes when he scents where other horses have been and wishes to know if they are within call. He swung down; a match flared. He saw the sign of the Bossimiers, rode back to the Ax, and told the news.

Dawn was coming now.

"We'll hit that trail at a fast clip as soon as it's light," Heck told them all. "They cain't get far on tired hosses, and with us hitting their trace this a way, right on top of them."

CHAPTER XLIII.

AT BAY.

SWINGING free as the rawboned horse crashed down, Jessie Preston came erect stiffly, after a moment of staggering about. She was in terrible shape physically—muscles cramped, head light and reeling. At once she began to look about.

She was in a hole, ringed about with what looked like solid rock walls! The old horse groaned, and struggled to get up. Jessie saw that his left front leg was broken. He had other hurts: internal wounds that were grievous. He fell over sidewise again, and relaxed.

Jessie staggered to the old rawbone's head and patted his cheeks. He tried, loyal old fellow that he was, to nicker, but the sound died in his throat!

Jessie started to hobble about the pit hole. She found, at the place a quarter way around it from where she had pitched over the rim, a crevice between two rocks. It was about a foot wide. She thought it was a way out, but a glance showed that it was not.

No sign of the wolves had been heard by her after she had pitched into the rocky depths. Now she saw, below, what seemed like an outlet—a mere crack, it seemed. She started toward that.

On the way down she passed the old horse, and again patted his cheek. He nickered again, and his eyes smote her heart with their pathos as they rolled in their sockets.

Now Jessie came to a place where some bones were, and she shuddered, for she knew them for human bones. She thought she heard the clamor of the wolf pack again, somewhere close by.

She saw, near the bones, a gun—Woodin's gun. She picked it up. It had four shells left. One chamber had been fired; one used as the "safety" chamber. She balanced the good gun in her feeble hand.

Again came the muffled clamor of the pack—the hunting call, and that seemed to come out of that crack in the rocks!

The old rawbone, behind her, heaved upright, startling her with a failing display of life. He was afoot, clumping about wildly. How he was able to get up with his injuries could only be explained in this way: In his condition, he was like a man frenzied with disease and so able to do the impossible with his dying energies!

Again came the wolf clamor, from the rock cleft. Could the wolves be coming after her through some underground passage, leading to the pit hole? She had heard of that labyrinth of channels in the rim rock, from the talk of the Ax men. The old horse squealed—mingled death defiance and fury. Instinct had taught him that he was cornered. He went back, face to the rock cleft.

Jessie turned—ran, with a flaming burst of energy that surprised her. She had thought herself quite spent. Now she could run! She kept the six-gun. She found the crevice between the two rocks above and hid herself there like a scurrying quail seeking refuge from hunting coyotes. The Lobo King, Queen, and pack came hurtling out of the rock cleft, at first clamorous, then silent.

The thing with the man scent was not in view; the horse stood, at bay, his broken leg dangling pitifully.

The King eagerly leaped, slashing at the rawbone's throat. The old horse clumped forward. The Lobo King fastened onto him; the Queen leaped for his hams. The rawbone staggered on and on. Lobo King got the throat hold. A mist obscured the rawbone's sight. He lurched, threw himself forward drunkenly on one leg in front now, its opposite limb behind, rocking like some kind of a new and pitiably weak plaything for the wolf pack. His hamstrings were cut in one leg.

The Lobo King dropped that deadly throat hold, struck the ground, and scooted back under the old horse's belly to assist the Queen in hamstringing.

The wolves snarled—snapped. The rawbone fell forward, his big, bony body lurching across the rock cleft from which the wolves had emerged.

For the moment, at least, his great form barred the way out; in his helplessness he had trapped the vulpine terrors and Jessie inside the pit hole.

Leaping back, sensing that something was wrong, the Lobo King called his pack off. He tried to leap over the body of the fallen horse and squeeze out to freedom through the rock cleft. In vain. The barrel of the horse filled it. The horse was still now, limp, although his lungs still pumped, bellowslike, denoting some remnant of life remaining.

The Lobo King, with a snarl of command, leaped off the body, and turned the pack toward that which his nose still told him was in the trap with him—big game!

Perchance, being trapped by the body of the horse, the servant of man, the Lobo King reasoned that man thus had planned it. If so, then a human was within reach, and there was yet time to slash and tear, to rend and to destroy.

CHAPTER XLIV.

INTO THE LABYRINTH.

HOPES were high among the Bossimiers as they dragged their way wearily up onto the rim rock, after a most hazardous climb from the valley of the Mondon above the Ax. They found here what they dared not hope for—rocky going to blind the trail. It was several miles down to where Claude had told them the underground and rock-bound hide-out could be found.

"Back from it a ways is a grassy place; thick, sweet grass among the big rocks; kind o' a park country," he encouraged them with. "In the old days, before Munster took up the Ax, old Jube used t' use that place as one of his closest hidin' places when he was wanted, bad. It's safe, entire."

It had been a long time since he had been there, however, and he worked too far off to one side, in the effort to keep away from the rim rock, and got below the throne. Dawn was coming when he dismounted and had them wait until he could scout forward, afoot, to the rim, and get a bearing that would assist in locating the opening in the rock face, always difficult to find.

Now he fixed the features of the landscape in mind. He found the place where the rim rock seemed to butt up against the rock face. He knew there were other entrances and exits to the labyrinth. He did not wish to appear at the rim rock, but to find one of those other entrances.

Drawing back, he signaled, and soon the crowd came about him. He had Hals Uldyke dismount and confirm his opinion that they were about opposite the rock cleft in the rock face at the rim rock. Uldyke confirmed this readily enough.

Since he had been scouting for the place, Uldyke reported, they had heard wolves somewhere above. The yelping had ceased abruptly.

The dawn seemed to come slowly; the half light was baffling. They were preoccupied with other thoughts, and they were watching toward the rim clamor rock and the Valley of the Mondon, now ahead. So they did not see the gaunt, dim shapes slipping along between the rocks half a mile distant.

By a curious freak of fate, this is what had occurred:

The rawbone, carrying Jessie, the wolves after him, had slipped along, bound almost due south, not far from the rim rock, but back a way from it, while the Bossimiers were up-bound from the valley. The Bossimiers had been under the overhang of the big shoulder, quartering up-grade desperately, their horses scrambling and making much noise, when the pack, driving the rawbone in grim silence, had gone to the verge of the pit hole. So the Bossimiers had not heard the chase. They had emerged upon the upper level, cut across the track of the wolf pack and quarry, and circled to keep from the rim rock, so they would not be observed from below, should dawn break suddenly by the blowing away of clouds by the dawn wind.

The wolves, intent only upon their quarry, hot upon the trail, led by their redoubtable commander who was seeing red and anxious only for big game, led by him in a rush to find the nearest of the entrances to their secure retreat, in order that they might charge out into the pit hole and there feast, had scurried for the crevice and slipped in. Had the wolves been less hot upon a trail of quarry already, according to their ways, fairly won, they would have been more cautious and scented or seen the Bossimiers. Had the Bossimiers been less engaged in their efforts to escape death, they would have paid some attention to the howling of wolves some of them had heard. They took it for a chance pack running deer. Not a man of them would have dreamed of

the real meaning of the wolf pack's being afoot at this hour, as they, human wolves, were afoot with the dawn.

Now Claude found a passage leading among the shattered rocks. He ordered the men to unsaddle. The saddles were piled at the entrance to the rock cleft. This entrance was wide at first, opening into an airy, dry cave. Into this Bossimier had the horses led.

"We'll all rest inside," he told them. "We can send out men t' graze the hosses later. The hosses have been grassed and watered; let's not show a nose till me know more."

"How we goin' t' find out anything?" Hal Uldyke asked.

"They'll come t' the Ax for remounts. We can look right down onto the Ax from a place inside. Come on——"

As he led them in several spoke of the odors in there. One or two said wolves used the den. Claude laughed.

"We got a few shells left; wolves don't attack folks in this country."

As he advanced, his ears caught distant sounds of growling, yelping; he heard a horse scream.

"What can that be?" Hal Uldyke demanded.

"Something outside; those wolves running something; we get it through the rock passages," Claude said. "They may have driven an Ax hoss onto the uplands to make a kill."

Light sifted into this underworld through the chimneys.

In his excitement Claude found the side passage leading to the throne, and he drew Uldyke out with him, telling the others to wait. On the verge of the throne he drew back—the dawn had broken clear while they had been stumbling along through the passages. He had stepped into clear day on the throne.

"We oughtn't show ourselves; they might see us from below; we can stoop down an' peek over without danger," and he was suiting the act to the word, when he heard:

"Claude; come here——"

He went swiftly to them, followed by Uldyke. The others were pointing to a side passage, pressing forward toward it.

Now, from that side passage came a strange medley of sounds. They thought they heard growls, yelps! Came, too, a shot!

They heard the voice of a woman—not shrieking, but calling out commands, and then singing.

"That's Jessie Preston's voice," Claude Bossimier suddenly shouted. "I know why old Jube wanted her; and if we're t' be thrown off our range, we might's well take her with us and cash in, either by trading her back to old Jube or to the people he was going to work with if he failed to make a good deal with that pink-eye, Martin."

Bossimier dashed down the rock passage, and they came after him.

The passage seemed blocked at its end. Bossimier could see a rift of daylight beyond whatever was blocking it. He stumbled forward, and fell with his hands outthrust.

"A hoss is blocking this; a hoss with his withers jammed into it. He's jerking—I hear wolves, and a woman singing out there!"

"That hole's bigger," Uldyke said.

It was enlarged now. The old horse had made a convulsive wrench of his mighty thews and drawn partly back.

"I'm going over him an' see what's there in that hole," Bossimier spoke decisively, leaping at the fallen horse, and beginning to scramble over it. The old horse remained supine, breathing heavily. Claude called: "It's old Jube's rawboned nag, boys; is he in here with Jessie Preston?"

They followed their leader, out into the pit hole, there to come upon a drama that for the moment held them spellbound and that they would not have pressed forward to see, had they not been drawn forward into its vortex by

an unwonted excitement, overcoming the inherent Bossimier inclination to dodge as long as possible.

Uldyke turned about, attracted by a strange noise. It was the muffled, rock-pent death cry of the old horse, now hunching forward in dying agonies. Uldyke fairly shrieked.

"See, he's been afoot, lurched forward; he's blocked us in——"

"We've got something t' worry about in here before we get to that," Claude said.

The wolves, hearing them, indeed, had turned to face them, tongues lolling, jaws slavering.

"They look loco, mad, t' me!" Bossimier whispered shudderingly. Their faces blanched. There was that in the mein of the Lobo King and pack that was enough to daunt men of the sternest breed!

The woman had ceased to sing; they looked for her in vain.

CHAPTER XLV.

ONE GLIMPSE.

BUT at dawn, eager to be in the saddle and away, Heck Thornton started for the corral to rope out a horse in place of lame Grulla.

True to his habit, he first got out his glasses to sweep the rim rock. He had asked Dazee Phillips and Mustard Joines about the wolves, and had received indifferent answers. He found that throne in the focus of his glasses.

Thornton, who was then behind the bunk house, resting the glasses on a projecting peg to steady them, in order to get clearer vision, was only showing the merest fraction of body and the object end of the glasses to any one looking down from the throne. Hence Claude Bossimier, when he came out onto the throne with Uldyke, did not see him.

Thornton saw him, however. He slipped along the bunk house, smashed in the side window, on the side away from the rim rocks above, with the butt of his gun, and called, through the fall of glass, through the opening:

"Turn out; saddle, men! I've just glimpsed Bossimier—Claude! Come!"

A few moments later a string of Ax riders were plunging across the flat, toward the upgrade leading to the rim rock.

But in the pit hole events were moving at breakneck pace, and the pit hole had become a maelstrom of seething animal and human endeavor to live, by right and might of gun, tooth, claw, sharp wits, the right and might of the strongest and most cunning!

When she had run into the space between the two rocks at the upper end of the pit hole, Jessie Preston had been at the end of hope, at the verge of despair.

Inside she cowered for a moment, but the touch of the good gun's butt in her palm gave her courage. The wolves, she felt sure, would not stand gun fire.

When the wolves left the horse and turned toward her, she shot once—missed, for she was not apt with a gun and was, moreover, hurried in her shot. That shot daunted them for a moment. The Lobo King, however, was wild, insane with fear and rage. He was trapped in this rock hole. He had been in man's traps before. Always he had escaped by force, by throwing his magnificent strength against whatever devices of man had gotten into his way. He had taken the Queen from her trap by force, at cost of torn jaws and hurting teeth. He had been struck by something coming from a flash of flame in the hand of man—and had lived.

Whatever was left of awe and fear of man had long since vanished from the Lobo King's makeup. He was starkly unafraid, and he now communicated his lack of fear to his pack.

He was charging straight forward,

when Jessie, thinking of the power of the human voice to awe animals, spoke sharply. Again the wolves paused. The Lobo King growled deep in his massive chest and again they advanced. Jessie shot—hit a wolf that spun about, snapping at the wound. Then the animals seemed to go crazy, snapping at each other. The Lobo King started to charge Jessie. She stood up and yelled, saying all manner of odd phrases and waving her arms menacingly. Again he drew back. She began to sing, to shout, to throw stones. The wounded wolf rolled about from side to side, snapping at his wound.

The Lobo King drew them together, in a ring, waiting for his own signal to charge home.

Strange noises came from behind. More and more men things were streaming into view, from the partly blocked-up hole whence the wolves had emerged into the pit hole. The Lobo King, the Queen, and pack, whirled to meet this new menace.

Jessie saw them, saw the Bossimiers, saw the old horse die, filling the rock cleft and making of the pit hole a flesh-blocked trap, holding them all.

She had no way of knowing that they did not know she was there. She did not know they had no knowledge that she alone had used the old rawbone horse to escape on. While she was debating what to do, while the human and four-footed wolves thus stood at gaze, tense, menacing, the break came with dramatic swiftness.

Claude Bossimier threw his gun forward—and shot. A wolf sprang upward and fell over backward, snapping, yowling in death struggles. Again that speedy gun cracked. Another wolf howled and ran about. The Lobo King, cornered, knowing that he was about to feel the searing pain from one of those flame-tipped things, snarled and leaped with the dumb courage of sheer madness. It was the signal to close in. The Lobo King was first to leap. Claude threw his gun—it snapped.

"Empty!"

He had not loaded up after that last stand they had been forced to make against the pursuers the night before. He had a few extra shells in his saddle pockets; his belt was empty.

A few dropping shots came from the others as the lobos leaped in; now they were battering at the wolves with gun butts. The rifles were with the saddlery. It was hand and fist and gun butt against claw and tooth. Some had knives.

The Bossimiers, standing together, threw the wolves off, and then the vulpine horde was between them and the dead horse that blocked up the hole through which they had entered that awesome pit hole. Blood flowed from bites, but no man's throat had been slashed in that flashing attack of the fanged demons.

The Bossimiers wheeled to meet the menace. The wolves crouched, mad with fear, crazed with the feeling of being in a rock-walled trap. The foe—man—was before them. Their leader, avid with lust of slaying, urged them on—leaping first. Again they came in. A man went down—ten wolves atop him. Claude, Uldyke, and the others charged forward, kicking, cursing, to get their man up, but his throat had been slashed.

"They'll pull us all down, one by one, that a way," Claude shouted over the din of the conflict. He turned about. Behind him was the rock wall; before him the ringed wolves, heads down for another leaping charge. He felt his throat tingle at the thought of white fangs meeting there.

But in that rock wall, he saw, in one flashing glance, a crevice, between two huge boulders set into the face of the wall. He thought of the woman's voice, of the dead horse of old Jube. He broke the line, and darted for the hole.

A woman filled the crack, steady gun in hand. It was Jessie Preston.

Cries of terror from his followers came to his ears, assailed by so many sounds. He staggered back and felt a hairy form strike his shoulders from behind. He was sent reeling, and again the wolf slashed at him. The gun of the woman spoke; the wolf crumpled in mid-leap and fell, howling in death. Bossimier, deserting his fighting followers, leaped again at the woman who had used her only shot in the effort to save a human life—his own worthless human life. He flung himself at her, threw her out of the safety niche, and began to thrust himself in, yammering in mingled rage and terror. Behind him the din increased. In the mouth of the crevice he paused, feeling that he was almost safe.

Jessie, whirled out of the hiding place from the force of his brutal thrust, came among the fighting wolves. She saw white teeth, glaring eyes, slavering jaws. She staggered, fell, and felt the buffet of a huge hairy shoulder as a wolf tried to throw her down. And then——

"Don't move!"

It was Thornton's voice.

Now, the rim of the pit hole was ringed with fire as the singing bullets came hailing down. The Ax outfit, guns out, with the Bossimiers and the wolves before them, shot, withering them down without mercy.

The men, drawing apart, threw up their hands. Thornton, seeing this, gave the order to cease firing. The wolves were all down now, all still.

It was then that Dazee Phillips, pointing, warned Thornton of the danger threatening the woman.

Jessie, still crouched, faint, had her back to the rock cleft in which Claude Bossimier had taken refuge. He had emerged as firing ceased. A glance above had told him the story. He was trapped. Those stern men above would not show him mercy; and he deserved not one iota of it. He knew it. It was the end of the trail for him and the house of Bossimier!

He had drawn his big-bladed knife, not a bowie, but a big pocket knife. He had had no time to draw this and open it in the fight against the wolves; in fact, in his panic, it had not occurred to him.

Now he had drawn it; now he came forth while they were watching dying wolves and surrendered men. He came forth, his face a mask of fury, and then he leaped—one desire in his black heart—that he might kill the woman before he was slain for his crimes. And so he leaped.

Thornton jerked up his gun, threw it; it was tipped with death flame.

Bossimier whirled and fell prone, on his back. Like the other wolves, he had died fighting to injure and rend, to the last gasp of his evil life!

Now Thornton went to the horses, still blowing and puffing, back from the pit hole, and got his long rope. He put a dally around a knob of rock. While the remainder of the Ax men kept the Bossimiers covered, Heck and Dazee slid down the rope and, with thongs thrown down by the men above, soon tied the captives securely.

Jessie, meanwhile having recovered, sat to one side, waiting her turn to be hauled above or let out of the opening the old horse's body was blocking.

The pit hole was a mystery to Thornton and the others. Jessie told how the wolves and the Bossimiers had entered it from below, and she pointed to the body of the horse, blocking the entrance.

Several more Ax men came down the rope and with them to guard the prisoners, now on the ground in a corner, the captors felt secure in their victory and set about to find a way out, without having to haul prisoners and the others back up the rock wall.

"Knot some ropes; get about three lines onto the old daid hoss an' fast to saddle horns and we can snake him out of that hole," Mustard Joines suggested. He was up on the rim.

Now, with true puncher adroitness, the ropes were knotted and thrown down. With Heck's they had rope enough for three lines. These, hitched to the dead horse's hind quarters and strained upon while the men in the pit hole pulled, brought the old horse out of his strange, rock-ribbed trap.

"There!" Heck exclaimed, with a feeling of relief, when suddenly from the pile of wolves a huge form shot forth, leaping, snarling, eyes gleaming, jaws slavering. Straight he leaped, hardly seeming to touch the rock floor of the pit hole. So great was his speed, so deep his cunning in use of it, that their shots missed; they had time for but a few, for fear of hitting each other.

"The King. The King!" they called.

Then he had vanished through the rock cleft, into the labyrinth.

One man leaped after him—Heck Thornton, working the ejector of his .45 as he hurtled forward. He reloaded as he ran.

He glimpsed the wolf whisking about a far turn; he leaped after him. He heard the animal turn and scurry pantingly. He followed, straining his eyes. He saw light. He leaped forward again; he was on the throne. Under him was the Valley of the Mondon. On the rim of the throne was the King, the great King, lips drawn back, eyes glaring, ruff erect, magnificent in the hour of crisis.

The King leaped. The hated man thing was in his presence. He threw all his royal power into that leap, and gripped for the throat as he thrust his jaws straight in at the climax of that mighty leap. The flashing white teeth grazed Heck's bronzed neck; he was thrown off balance, could not shoot as he wished.

Then the King sprang back, to the verge, glaring, slavering. All his passion now was to kill this man, this terrible man, who alone blocked his way to freedom.

The King crouched—sprang. The ball met him in mid-air, crashing home through his great, dark breast. The King fell over backward, whirled about and leaped straight out into space, four paws spread, head out, back in a taut line.

Heck, striding to the verge of the throne, followed the body down, flame spiriting from his gun in a steady stream.

When the body of the King was found at the foot of the rock wall later, four bullets were found to have crashed through his back as he fell.

An hour later all were on the way down to the Ax.

There they heard the news. Osier and his posse had wiped out Luroy and his crowd and had cleaned up Branchton. Deuce Munster and his crowd in, were swearing mad because they had missed the big fight at the pit hole. In the outcome the captured Bossimiers were either hanged or given heavy sentences. The widows, remarried to honest men, were permitted to remain; the valley became respectable. The old rawbone, hauled out, was taken down to the Ax and buried with this headstone at the foot of his grave: "Rawbone; he did his best for a stranger and died doing it."

The papers Heck had taken from Martin's clothing told of the plot to disinherit Jessie Preston. In the end she claimed her estate, converted it into cash, and moved with Heck to that nice place he had bought in the upper country. They often visited the Ax, and the next ranch above, where Dazee Phillips, with the reward money on the wolf pack, had set up a horse ranch with his sweetheart to bring joy and

comfort to the heart of the good-humored young fellow, a prime favorite throughout the entire region. Heck and Jessie would not take a share of the reward money and all the other Ax men in at the finish of the royal wolf pack resigned their shares to help Dazee set up his home with his very pretty bride.

The day Heck and Jessie were married at the Ax the boys gave them a rousing celebration. At its close Deuce Munster proposed this toast:

"To the bride, who couldn't have escaped matrimony, even if I'd had to marry her myself."

There was a smile on his homely face, but the mist in his eyes told them that his remark was to be taken seriously, for all he was hiding his heartache under a jovial good-by to the king of wolfers and his happy bride.

THE END.

FOR A NEW FOREST POLICY

A BILL was recently introduced into the Senate by Senator McNary of Oregon and into the House of Representatives by Congressman Woodruff of Michigan, which provides for a new forestry plan. This bill provides for the expenditure of forty million dollars in forest lands and forest conservation. Under its provisions the government is asked to purchase about eight million acres of land, principally in the Eastern and Great Lakes watershed territory.

The American Forestry Association, which sponsored the measure, suggested that the funds be expended in speeding up forest purchases in the Appalachians, and the pine regions of the Southern and Lake States. About three million additional acres are needed for the proper protection and conservation of timber in these mountains. The officials of the Forestry Association declare that under careful management the proposed Federal timber areas would not only produce timber and pulpwood and protect stream flow, but would furnish recreation spaces for three-fourths of the nation's population.

LET THE INSECTS DO IT

ONE of the expensive processes in paper making is barking the logs, since it is highly desirable that no bark should get into the wood pulp. The Northwest Forest Experiment Station was informed some weeks ago by Doctor Craighead of the Bureau of Entomology that insects can sometimes be pursuaded to perform this work for the paper companies for nothing.

One Southern lumber company gets insects to work, says the bureau, by girdling close to the ground the pine to be cut for pulp wood. If this is done in the late summer, a number of bark borers and other beetles are attracted to the tree, and in a few weeks they have the bark so completely loosened that it can easily be stripped off when the trees are felled. At this point, however, the truce between beetle and forester is at an end, for logging during the following winter destroys the harbored insects in the bark, and this one abundant feast is their last.

Another Notch

By

Frank Richardson Pierce

Author of "What a Setter Did," etc.

WELL, sir, in them days one Texas Ranger was good for one riot. If there was two riots and things were quiet in other places then maybe they'd send down two Rangers for the two riots. This month was a busy one and so they sent me down to straighten out the trouble at the two towns." Pop Thrasher's eyes gleamed as he recalled the incident. "The first riot had about died down when I got there. I told a number of bad ones to drift and locked up several others, then forked my horse and headed for the other mess. Pete Baxter was running wild and I knew this wouldn't be straightened up without gun play so I got ready. It was this here gun right here with the four notches that I used. The last notch was cut for Pete. That was the way we always worked—get the leader and the rest of the gang just became a lot of scared men hunting cover. I mind the time——"

"Apple sauce, Pop, I'll bet you never shot an outlaw in your life." Ryan, assistant superintendent at the county farm grinned. He was never brutal, quite the contrary. Rather he was thoughtless and the same story told again and again arouses the doubts of thoughtless youth. "Apple sauce, Pop, and you know it, but I'll admit you tell it the same way every time. I'll bet you actually believe it."

Pop Thrasher bristled. "Look at them notches," he said shrilly. "Do you think they'd be there if each one didn't mean I'd shot an outlaw in battle?"

"Give me that old gat, Pop, and I'll cut in a few notches to prove how easy it is."

"Men have been killed for less than that, you young upstart," snorted the old peace officer. "No man can doubt my word——"

"I'm not saying you are lying, Pop. I merely believe you have told those yarns over so many times you believe 'em. This stuff about men quick on the draw, lightning shooting and all that is the bunk. It never happened."

Pop Thrasher returned his .44 to the holster and looked about the home. The real old-timers present believed him. Sheriff "Draw" Thrasher was too real in an earlier day to be forgotten by even declining years. "Young man," he growled, "go for your gun."

In pretended seriousness Ryan made a quick move for the hip. With a flash the old man's gun covered him. "You see, you young fool, you'd have been dead in your tracks in the old days. I'm how many years older than you?"

"Hanged if I know, Pop, about a hundred, I guess."

"All right, I'm a hundred years older than you are and still I'm faster with my hands. It's hard to shake off the habits of years, and if going for my gun quicker'n the other fellow hadn't been a mighty good habit with me I wouldn't have been sheriff as long as I was. In the days when I was sheriff a sheriff couldn't get life insurance. Let's see what was it started all this fuss?"

"A young lady from one of the newspapers is looking for a story, Pop, and I told you not to go too strong in your story telling or people would not believe you. I particularly suggested that you tone down that Texas Ranger stuff a bit. It don't sound reasonable they'd send one Ranger down to settle two riots in mining towns. More than likely they would call out the militia and do it right."

"You don't know the Texas Rangers," the old man observed tartly. "I always did say they teached the wrong kind of history in the schools. Now I know it. What time will the young lady call?"

"She's waiting below."

"Wait'll I pretty myself up a bit and I'll come down." Pop hastily combed his hair and adjusted his necktie, then he descended to the reception room.

Ryan and a young woman were awaiting him. Nearby stood a bored young man with a camera. The girl was seeking a story, the young man a photograph to go with it. "This is Pop Thrasher, known in the early days as Draw," said Ryan by way of introduction. 'What he tells you may not be historically correct, but it'll be good."

Bit by bit the reporter drew out the story she sought. "And now," she said by way of conclusion, "speaking as a veteran peace officer, what do you think of the holdups and shootings we have been having in the city of late?"

"Young lady, being a gentleman I can't properly tell you because it requires cussin' and a lot of it. Let's see. They held up a bank messenger and got ten thousand dollars, they followed a lady into a bond office and got six thousand, then they held up a motion-picture office and got a lot more."

"One police officer was killed and another wounded," the reporter reminded him. "What of that? Our paper has been criticizing the police department severely."

"They shouldn't do it," Pop replied. "It ain't the policeman's fault. In my day we wore a gun where we could get it. A policeman has to lift up his coat tail to get his gun, young lady, so what chance has he when the other fellow has him covered? Why in my day it was almost as good as death to go for your gun when the other fellow had the drop on you, but I did it in a pinch; even with Pete Baxter. When you're a law enforcer you've got to act even if it costs your life, like it does the policemen sometimes. It ain't right."

And right there the girl got her real story. The photographer had been intrigued sufficiently to forget his boredom. "Have you got any of your old togs left, Mr. Thrasher?" he inquired.

"Up in the attic in my old trunk there——"

"Great! How about it, Mr. Ryan?"

"Sure, doll Pop up for the picture. Too bad we can't show the notches in his gun."

Pop shook his trigger finger at Ryan. "Some day, gol darn you, I'll make you eat them words." He turned to the girl. "The biggest chump in the world is the cuss that won't believe his own eyes. Time and again I've drawn my gun to show Ryan how fast I am and

he won't believe it. Look at them notches."

The girl bent her head so close to Pop's that he forgot the past for the exquisite appreciation of the present. "Mr. Thrasher, those notches look to me as if they were cut many years ago."

"Yah!" shouted Pop, at Ryan's retreating form, "what do you think of that? Seems like the women are getting more sense every day and the men less."

Pop and all his range clothes including a gold star appeared on the front page of the second section, the following day. With the picture was a story of Pop's life. It was a human interest theme and yet the clever reader could see a vein of criticism of the police department. There was editorial comment to the effect that it would seem the old peace officer who could shoot quick and straight was gone, but the descendants of the old bad men were present stronger than ever.

The opposition paper, lining up with the administration, spoke of the childish prattling of an old man with an imagination. Later as the fight grew warmer they called Pop a liar, and Ryan smiled when the old man wanted to buckle on his guns and settle the insult man to man. "Let 'em rave, Pop!" he advised.

"But I'm held up to the community as a liar," Pop fumed. "By heck——"

"Calm down. You don't care whether they believe you are a liar or not!"

"The devil I don't!"

"Well, anyway this affair is blowing over. The holdup crowd has gone to greener fields."

"Huh! 'Two-gun' Ashford, who learned me how to shoot and made me his deputy when I was twenty, said, 'When things get quiet, expect something to happen.' They're waiting for something good, then they'll strike fast."

It was several days later that Pop Thrasher learned the value of publicity. A brisk young man appeared at the county home and asked for the old-timer. "Saw your picture in the paper," he explained. "We can use you at fifty dollars a week——"

"Fifty dollars a week?" Pop Thrasher asked in astonishment. "Somebody you want I should kill?"

The other laughed. "Hardly that. We have secured the great pioneer motion picture showing the early cattle days in Texas, including the Rangers. We'll be packing 'em in like sardines at the highest prices, but we want to do this thing right. I have doped out a pioneer scene with you the central figure. Sometimes you'll stand out in front, and when you are tired we'll have a natural camp for you to rest in. We'll let you fix it up to suit yourself so it'll be historically correct."

Pop Thrasher's eyes misted and suddenly two tears formed and commenced to roll down his cheeks. "You ain't foolin' an old man, be you?"

"I should say not!"

"I'd just about given up hope of ever making any more money. Seems like when we get old they shove us aside, but I'm wanting to take one more look at the old scenes before I die and a couple of hundred will just about do it. Young man, you don't suppose you'll need me a month?"

"We figure on a three weeks' run, maybe a month. All right, the deal is on! Get your things on and come along. We've arranged for you to sleep and eat at a hotel across the street!" Things moved fast in this day and age. That is, everything but the gun hands of peace officers.

"Three weeks and maybe four," Pop Thrasher muttered the words over and over again. Perhaps he could visit the old range country once more. It had been a dream of years, but fate had intervened and in the end had cast him, a bit of driftwood, on the shore of the Home, a public charge.

At first the crowds annoyed the old man. Hundreds of faces milling about with eyes upon him, while policemen lined them up before the box office. Later he sensed he was a page of that past in which they were intensely interested. Such as he had been plucked from what had gone before and made to live on the screen. If they were interested before they entered the show house they were doubly intrested when they emerged. Some examined his gun quietly and noted the notches. The gold sheriff's badge with its inscription intrigued them. Some even asked him questions which he answered with quiet dignity. Time passed swiftly and there was no diminishing of the crowds. A four-weeks' run had been decided upon, perhaps five—a dream of treading old trails was close to realization.

Even as a picture brought home the past, fate decreed a trail of the old and a trail of the new should cross. The trail of the new was now two hundred miles from the trail of the old. Doyle, eyes of steel blue and as cold, lips thin and cruel, snapped his fingers. "Ready?" he demanded.

The others in the room nodded. "Ward, take the seat to the left. You are standing at the curb with motor running. Turner, the chalk marks on the floor indicate the entrance to the Liberty Theater. That chair represents the safe. You are to collect the box-office receipts. From where I stand I can protect you from attack within the theater or from without. This cigar box represents a marble column in front of the entrance behind which I shall hide."

"We got away with three big jobs in that town, won't they be expecting a fourth?" Turner objected.

"No! This is Friday. To-morrow the papers will be full of the job we are going to pull here at the bank at noon to-day. Each job has our stamp upon it. The two towns are two hundred miles apart. Get the idea?"

"Sure! I do now. Police will figure we have moved our operations down here. They've been tense for nearly two weeks over there and now they'll relax."

"Exactly! I've overlooked nothing. That Texas picture is packing the house from eleven in the morning until midnight. The receipts will be big. It's a real haul, boys. They know we shoot to kill and the instant we appear they'll quit cold. The cop on the beat reports at a box two blocks away, so we'll not have him to contend with."

"Say, how about that old Texas Ranger with the .44 camped out in front?" Turner suddenly demanded.

"Press-agent stuff! They picked the old guy up at the county farm for atmosphere. He's too old to see to shoot, and his hand is too shaky, besides the gun isn't loaded. I examined it to make sure. Any more questions? No? Very well, then. After to-morrow's job we'll go north by train—they might pick us up on the highway."

The cop on the beat paused to exchange a few words with the ticket taker at the Liberty. "I see the auto bandits have moved on to greener fields."

"Yeah! Fifteen thousand cold dollars. Suppose it's the same crowd that pulled those jobs here?"

"No doubt of it. They work like a clock. They must act it out over and over again beforehand. The bird with the steel eyes stands guard and does the shooting; the little dark guy scoops gold and currency into a bag as if it was his; and the blond driver shoots the car up to the curb the second they need it for the get-away. The police department down South have posted a thousand dollars reward, dead-or-alive stuff." He moved toward the old man squatting down before a camp fire. "How is

Sheriff Draw Thrasher this evening? Thousand dollars reward, dead or alive, reminds you of old times, doesn't it?"

"Yep, I mind the time——" The policeman and door man listened attentively, for the story Pop told was a new one.

"By the way, sheriff, I notice the old gat is loaded to-night."

"Yep! I bought me a box of loads and practiced a little to see if the old gun would shoot. She does. Got to thinking if I'm playing the part of a Texas Ranger I shouldn't go around with an empty gun; it ain't natural. The motion picture made mistakes enough without me who knows better adding to 'em. She's loaded, ready for business."

The officer smiled, then glanced at a street clock a block away. "Your yarn has made me late, sheriff!" The officer hurried away at a rate of speed far in excess of the conventional policeman's pace.

Within the theater the climax of the picture was approaching. Those who had seen it were remaining for a second view; a few stragglers only were drifting out. Pop Thrasher yawned, and became tense in the midst of it. Two men had brushed past him, one had entered the theater, the second man was peering from behind a marble column. In the latter's hand was a .45 caliber automatic pistol. A block away a car was approaching at a leisurely pace. Within the theater a girl stifled a scream, the door man lifted his hands, and Pop Thrasher's ancient hands came up reluctantly. He could see a dark man scooping coin and currency into a black bag.

The office door opened and the manager appeared with drawn weapon. The man with the steel-blue eyes hesitated briefly, then lifted his pistol and fired. The approaching car speeded up slightly. Pop Thrasher's hand came swiftly to his hip. It was a lightning draw for even a younger man. Doyle saw it and fired; at the same moment something unseen struck him in the breast and knocked him to the marble floor of the lobby. He lifted his hand once more, then the gun slipped from his fingers. The dark man held the bag with one hand and advanced with drawn pistol. He was nervous, for he had seen Doyle fall, but knew not the cause. Then smoke from an ancient .44 answered the question in his mind. He must shoot it out. He swung swiftly and in the movement showed the results of many hours target practice. A stupid expression came over his face, his right arm was dead, hanging useless at his side. More smoke was curling from the ancient .44, curling lazily upward. "Don't shoot, again!" he pleaded.

"Don't have to!" answered Pop Thrasher, but he fired again as an automobile that had stopped, suddenly speeded up. The front tire exploded as a bullet plowed through it, the car climbed the curb and knocked a lamppost to the sidewalk. A policeman, breathless, thrust a pistol into the driver's back.

Within the theater the shots seemed to come from the weapon of a Texas Ranger on the screen; it was a part of the play, made more realistic as the acrid smoke drifted over the audience. Some of them stirred uneasily. The picture ended; the lights flashed on. In a twinkling the spectators were brought home to the present. The romance of the old faded with the flood of lights. The show was over. Just a picture after all, just a pleasant lesson in history. And yet——

A buzz swept through the crowd. There had been a real holdup! In front a police patrol wagon was standing backed to the curb. Four men were carrying a limp form to the wagon. Near by stood a man, handcuffed. There were blood stains on the marble floor, and other blood stains on the rich

carpet where a man stood with a useless arm. He was under guard.

Ryan worked his way through the crowd. Somehow he sensed the answer to it all. It sounded like some of the stories he had heard. There stood Sheriff Draw Thrasher, cool when every one else was excited. Then he remembered Texas Rangers were always cool. "By golly, Pop, you did it! You got the steel-eyed man! How did you do it?"

"I might tell you," retorted the sheriff, "but you'd prob'ly think I was yarning. You wouldn't believe your eyes." It was Pop Thrasher's day.

"Old-timer, I apologize from the bottom of my heart. I'll believe anything you tell me from now on, and I'll lick anybody that doubts your word. They say he had you covered?"

"Yep! Ain't the first time in my life I've been covered. I was ready and drew fast. His bullet nipped a piece out of my coat, but didn't get me. He'd practiced a lot, but I'd had more experience." Scores were crowding about to hear the story at first hand.

"Do I understand you were expecting something of the sort?" inquired a reporter.

"Yes, and no. You see in the early days most of the gunmen that were real dangerous had steel-blue eyes." The reporter noted the fact Sheriff Draw Thrasher's eyes were steel blue. "Lots of people came up and looked over my old .44, but one of 'em looked at me with steel-blue eyes and examined the gun in a way that made me suspicious. At first I was going to tell the police, then I says to myself, I says, 'Draw, if you go telling the police they'll laugh at you. It seems like the best thing the present generation does is to laugh at us old cusses!' So, instead of telling the police and getting myself laughed at I got ready, and waited." Pop tapped the butt of his .44 affectionately.

"By the way," said the reporter, "there is a thousand dollars reward offered. What are you going to do with the money."

"There's an old road agent I once shot it out with. He's reformed and down on the county farm. I guess I'll take him along on that visit to the old ranges in Texas. There're one or two things we've argued a lot about, such as the lay of the land, and we can settle 'em."

With Ryan's aid, Pop escaped the crowd and returned to his room. Ryan lighted a cigar and settled down. "What you waiting for?" demanded the old man.

"To see you carve another notch in that old .44," he said and he handed Sheriff Draw Thrasher a knife.

RANCHERS OFFER TERMS TO CITY

RANCHERS of Owens Valley, from which the city of Los Angeles, California, draws most of its water supply, and where for years a bitter water feud has raged between valley residents and the city, recently announced their willingness to settle the controversy on the basis of the city's proposal to guarantee irrigation supply for thirty thousand acres in the valley.

Acceptance of the city's offer, however, is contingent on the payment of a five million, three hundred thousand indemnity to reimburse valley interests for loss already sustained through the city's alleged unfair methods of acquiring water rights. Should the city not approve the reparation suggested, the ranchers offer the alternative proposal that Los Angeles purchase all remaining farm lands in the valley for an aggregate price of twelve million dollars.

Stuffed

By Bert George

CHAPTER I.

CHILI SEES THE GIRL.

FOOT in the stirrup, Chili Derwent paused, hand on the horn, to advise Sandy Land.

"Shake a laig, caballo; roll your tail; we're due in town in a couple o' hours. You ain't goin' t' see your gal, but I am, and I want t' see her this evening, not t'-morrow morning."

Sandy Land shook his head, swung under his rider as he lifted, pitched a little to show he was a top hoss, then settled into a handy canter that presently took him from the Tin Cup A to Mesa Brilar.

The moon, a golden sickle, rode through fleets of fleecy cloud boats in the west. The town was quiet that night. And it was quiet in the little parlor of Sheriff Huston's house. That was why the sheriff, wishing to get a match from the mantel match safe, blundered in there in time to be aware that some one had kissed some one else.

"Ha-a-a-arump!" Sheriff Huston exploded. Then he got hold of the match and it flared, not to light his pipe up anew, but that he might see who it was that had thus either taken liberties with or pleased his pretty daughter Luella.

Luella, in a nice white dress, and with a red, red bow in her hair, was sitting at one end of a large sofa and Chili Derwent at the other.

"Oh, it's you?" the sheriff said, as if Chili were some new sort of animal.

"Pa, you know who it is—you ought to, by this time," Luella emitted, like a stream of sparks. She had the Huston temper, and it showed in voice and manner now. Her eyes were alight with an inner fire of resentment. Her cheeks were aflame.

Chili said nothing, although obviously it was taking all the will power residing under his red thatch to achieve such a result. His strong, lean fingers were dug into the plush of the sofa. His face, too, was aflame.

"By this time, eh?" the sheriff blundered on. "I should say 'by this time,' if I was you, Luella."

"What's wrong, dad? You always was glad to have Pete come here before now."

Pete was Chili. Chili was his title among those who liked him, and had been bestowed because he was known to be not only red-headed, but to act red-headed upon special occasions.

"Well, this is wrong: I've heard that he's going to be a candidate for sheriff against me in the next caucus."

Luella looked at Chili in amazement.

Old Man Huston had been the town's marshal and the county's sheriff for so many years that even the old-timers had lost track of them all.

"You heard what I said; I heard you was goin' t' run against me," Huston thundered, leveling a quivering forefinger at Derwent.

"Your hearin' is good," Chili said through white-lined lips. "I intended t' tell you about it when I came into town, but you was out, so I waited till——"

"Till you could come in here, my enemy behind my back, an' make the riffle with Luella, eh? I'd like you for a stranger."

"Suit yourself," responded Chili, getting up and holding himself very rigid. "But I'm tellin' you I'm the next sheriff. You don't need the office, and I do. You've got money; you've had all the honors. I don't care for the honors, but I do need the money, and if I can get it, with a square fight, I'm on my way."

He turned to go. Huston sent after him: "An' don't come back—savvy?"

"I ain't deaf a whole lot," he responded, at the door now.

"Dad!" Luella was afoot, hands outstretched toward Chili in appeal, face turned toward her father.

Derwent paused a moment on the threshold. The sheriff struck another match.

"I think I saw your hat on the hall rack; good night."

"Good night, Lu," Chili said to the girl, over the father's gray thatch that he was now currying industriously with his stubby finger tips.

"Well, that's that," and the sheriff of Mesa Brilar sat down on the sofa.

Luella gave her father a look that showed him a storm of anger such as he never had seen on her countenance before. He winced inwardly as she went to her room. She was his only child, and had kept house for him after the death of her mother two years before. Luella was sensible, a home maker. It had been said that when she and Chili married, a good home would be established. For Chili, with all his proneness to excitement and swift action, had a saving touch of thrift and had rolled up a surplus beyond that usually held by a puncher of twenty-five. He had invested the money wisely in mining shares, traded in horses on the side, and won the first prize thrice running in the Mesa Brilar rodeo; prizes and bets on himself bringing him in one thousand dollars from that source alone.

Huston went out of the house, to the jail next door. In the room used for the jail office sat Hosea Parkins, deputy to Huston for years. He was a short, fat man who rode with surprising lightness in the saddle, could bring in almost any gunman he was sent after, and was equipped with courage. He had "sided" Huston in many a tight corner and thought that no one else ever born was fit to be the sheriff in place of his idol. In fact, so far did he carry his worship of the sheriff that he would have turned on his own son, if the son had said anything against Huston.

"Did you call the turn?" Parkins asked.

"There's the answer," said the sheriff, waving his hand.

In the street outside some one was riding, and singing as he rode.

Dude stood by the lamplit bar,
Manicuring a light guitar,
Along came a man with a turned-up nose,
Who said his ears sure craved repose.
Dude objected;
He was ejected,
And to the umpteenth degree subjected—
Never min', Lulu gal,
Don't feel sad;
We'll get the better
O' your old dad!

"I'd call that a pretty brash answer," Hosea twitted the sheriff. "I don't

think my Verne would've made all this trouble on you."

"Have it your own way," Huston shot out, like a firecracker exploding under a tin pan. "Your Verne wouldn't make trouble—he ain't that nervy and my girl would have him, anyway. She's said that, in seven languages."

"How did Lula take it?" asked Hosea anxiously.

"Dang it, shet up," said the sheriff, getting up and striding out, leaving Parkins to stare. The sheriff never before had used a harsh word to his deputy, and that phrase had cut Parkins like a knife.

His son Verne was not ambitious; hung around the town's worst holes and corners and had been a source of grief to his father for several years. Old Parkins lived in hopes that he would reform and be accepted by Luella, his hero's daughter. Luella had ended such hopes weeks before, upon the advent of Chili Derwent. Since then, young Parkins' star had been declining fast.

CHAPTER II.

CHILI LOSES, YET WINS.

I HEAR Derwent's going t' pitch into you over at Pecan Flats to-morrow night," Parkins said to Huston. He had just heard of the intended political rally of the opposition and had run all the way from the wagon yard to tell the news.

"So? I'll be right there, and if he b'ars down too hard, well——" he said, shifting his holster about a bit as if to ease his body of the weight of his heavy gun.

"I hope he don't go t' digging in too hard," returned Parkins, now in better control of his wind. "We've not kept very good accounts. No one ever expected us to. We've took in fees an' spent money and the fire in the jail, when that Oiler tried t' burn himself up last year, burned up the records——"

"He don't want t' make no loose charges against me," said the sheriff, his brow black with anger. "I've had t' run this office by gun law lots of times, an' I've spent money when and where needed, and took in what I could. Being a fee office, what was left was mine. Any man that wants in on that can have it."

"Pat Miller said he heard some big scandal was to be aired."

"I'll be right there," declared the sheriff savagely. He took out his gun, dribbled the shells out of it, and began to oil and clean the hair-trigger weapon with meticulous care and thoroughness.

Next evening Pecan Grove, at the edge of Pecan Flats, was lighted with flares that wavered in the gentle breeze like fiery streamers tipped with black where the flames became excess of smoke, unvaporized. All through the grove horses were either picketed out or tied. Buckboards and nesters' wagons were to be seen, drawn up around the central clearing, where the dancing pavilion was. From the steps of this structure the speakers were to declare their principles.

A bass fiddle, three small fiddles and a guitar, furnished music—each instrument played by a volunteer friend of Chili Derwent's. They were just closing a lively medley as Huston and Parkins rode into the grove.

A ripple of excitement swept the crowd at the arrival of the sheriff and his hard-shooting deputy. Huston was seen to sag over sidewise in his saddle and thus ease himself after his ride.

"Better get a front-row seat," an old-time cattleman called to Huston jocularly.

"I've got the seat that I like best, right on my top hoss," old man Huston shot back.

This sharp retort was greeted with applause. It was just such a phrase as reminded them all that he had used that seat to advantage many times in enforc-

ing the law and in running down all sorts of bad men.

"Hi, Chili, bring on your wolf an' let's hear him howl," some one demanded.

The musicians, finding themselves drowned out, desisted in their efforts to dispense harmony.

Chili, who had been waiting in the pavilion, with some friends, for the music to cease, before beginning his appeal for votes, now stepped to the front of the entrance way, facing the audience. Children had been eating cake or bread-an-'lasses; women who had been gossiping; men who had been chaffing each other, all gave him their attention. The last snarling hound dog at the edge of the crowd was cuffed to silence between the bent knees of his owner; the final horse snort resounded. Then the people were still.

"Ladies and gentlemen of Francisco County——" Chili began. He made a pause and then glanced at Huston, resuming: "And my worthy opponent, whom I honor for his past services, but whose office I covet because I need it more than he does!"

This bold and unexpected flat-footed appeal put the crowd on edge. Huston shifted about uneasily in the saddle.

"My worthy opponent, Sheriff Huston, has had this office for twenty-five years. He is not old. He is still in the full vigor of his age. But he does not need the money. He is wealthy, and I am glad of it, for he has earned his wealth fairly, by serving the people and in legitimate business.

"Like all other young men of sense, I have an ambition to set up a home of my own. I own land on the Cottonwood. To do what I want to down there I need a few thousand dollars—or will in the next few years. My income as sheriff would pay my bills in setting up my new ranch. Now, friends, I want your help to get that money. By your help, I mean votes in the coming primaries or caucus. You-all know that I can ride an' shoot an' no one's accused me yet of being a skunk or a highbinder. I'm throwing no bricks at Sheriff Huston. But I want his job. He don't need it; I do."

This was the gist of Chili's appeal. He flavored it with some good stories and at its close was rewarded by generous applause. Then he said:

"Now, this pavilion and music was hired by me, personal, but if my worthy opponent wishes to give his side of it, he's welcome to all I've hired here. Come on down, sheriff, an' make a speech."

"I make mine this a way," and Sheriff Huston whipped out his gun and fanned its contents rapidly into the upper air. Then he holstered the empty gun and rode away, followed by the approving murmurs of the crowd.

All through his campaign Chili stuck to that line of talk. He knew his people too well to attempt to blackguard Huston, and he would not have done so, in any event, not believing in that sort of thing.

As the night of the primary approached, interest mounted. It was felt that whereas Huston had the support of the old-timers, the younger element sympathized with Chili Derwent. The primary was held in the Mesa Brilar wagon yard, where an open space was roped off, inside of which the ballot box was placed. Lines were to be formed and the voters marched in to drop their ballots—printed slips given out by the two candidates.

The affair had all the aspects of a merrymaking, for "every one and his dawg," as one old longhorn said, was there.

Luella, mounted on her trim black, watched the voting. Obeying the orders of her father, she had not seen Derwent alone or encouraged him to call upon her at home, since the break in relations had occurred.

The torches cast flickering lights over the crowd—one of the town's largest. Huston was stepping about, seconded by Deputy Parkin, whispering to his adherents. The young men were working hard for Derwent.

At the signal, the two lines formed —one for Huston, one for his young rival. The lines seemed to be about equal length. As they filed down the lane between the ropes and passed the big ballot box, they dropped the paper slips through the crack in the box top and then went on to pick out comfortable places to wait for the result.

"She'll be dang near a tie," Parkins anxiously whispered to his chief, as the tellers were directed to open the box and count the votes.

His son, Verne, was at hand, eager to stir up trouble slyly.

The counting went on amid a grim silence. At its close Able Iswald, aged teller selected to make the announcement official, and known for his fairness, said:

"We find, folks, that whereas Mr. Derwent has 358 votes, Sheriff Huston has 360. This nominates Sheriff Huston again, and, according t' the rule in our party affairs, is equal to an election, for any one that votes against him won't have any sympathy."

"You bet he won't," Verne Parkins put in boastingly.

"I congratulate the sheriff," Derwent shouted, over the applause of the crowd. He strode forward, hand extended. It was right there that Huston made his first mistake. Success had made him a bit heady, and he turned his back on his defeated opponent, saying: "I ain't no use for skunks that knife a man in the dark."

"Good for you, sheriff," Verne Parkins chimed in quickly.

"Dad!" Luella's voice came, clear as a bell over the voices of the others. Huston knew he had made a mistake, and that made him all the more angry. But he was stubborn and walked away, head down, and only Parkins' reminder of the need for thanking the public for its support, drew him back grudgingly. He tried to make his little speech of acceptance warm, but the crowd received it coldly. Verne Parkins, too, was made to feel the displeasure of many over his sneaking attempt to stir up added trouble.

Huston noticed when he got home that Luella, contrary to her usual custom on primary night, was not there to smile her congratulations. He missed this, and went to bed more angry still.

Awakening late, with the feeling that something was wrong, Sheriff Huston found a note on the kitchen table, where he had expected to find his breakfast waiting, warm and nice.

DEAR DAD: Your jealousy and mean treatment of Pete Derwent have turned me against you. I've gone with him to be married. When you get over your unreasonable hatred for him, I shall be glad to be again,
Your Loving Daughter, LULU.

At first he threw this away, crumpled and torn. Then he got it and kissed it, and his eyes misted with tears as he went into the parlor and looked at the portrait of her mother, whom he had promised, on her dying bed, that he would be good to the girl and love her.

CHAPTER III.

STILL A CANDIDTE.

"WHAT'RE the official figures of the election?" Sheriff Huston asked Parkins, who was reading the *County Herald* the day after the votes were cast.

"All right; only a few rustlers and bad men that you've worsted in former years seem t've voted against you."

"How is it up Owl Head Creek?"

"Our list shows twenty-five voters in that district; all voted for you."

"That means that Derwent played the game square an' didn't cut me up in his own neighborhood?"

"Sure does."

"He's tryin' t' get me t' make up. After marrying my only girl right out from under my nose and against my will, you'd think he'd want to make up some way. He's probably getting hard up for coin and wants to be next t' the old man's bank roll," he added a bit boastfully.

"I'll bet that's it," Parkins echoed his chief's suspicions. "I guess you've got him buffaloed—wha-a-a-a-at's this?"

Huston snatched the paper from him and read:

STILL A CANDIDATE.

To the voters of Mesa Brilar region: Sheriff Huston has been reëlected. He will give you another good year of service. Then I'll be a candidate again. I still want and need the office. He doesn't need it. Please give me your votes in next year's primary.

P. DERWENT.

"Cocky as a tom-tit on a cholla," Parkins irritated his chief with.

"Don't look like he was scared none, or tryin' t' curry favor, Hosea," answered the sheriff, a touch of regret in tone and manner now.

"No; but think of his nerve t' come right out again, tryin' to beat you, that's been our sheriff since Geronimo was a yearling."

Parkins went on to flatter Huston to the skies and ended by making him believe that the younger man was trying to force a fight from which there could be no turning back.

"If you pull down for him, folks'll think you're yellow," he rubbed it in. Huston had shut up his own home and was living with Parkins. Luella had not been away from her own ranch home on the Owl Head. The outfits running cattle up there were all stag outfits, and she was the only woman in that region. Hence he had heard very little talk about her and had received no direct word from her. Stubborn as a mule himself, he had not written to her or gone near her new home.

The defi of Derwent was the only fly in Sheriff Huston's ointment. He was feeling strong and lively, did his work well, and, under the irritating influence of the idol-worshiping Parkins, began to boast, never a good thing to do before Western men. He began, too, to belittle young Derwent. This did not set well with many women, who liked Luella and missed her from the town's merrymakings. But he kept his influence with the old-timers with whom he associated mostly. They backed him up in belittling Derent.

The months passed. The calf crop was gathered; summer settled over range land. Life went on drowsily. Then the calm was shattered by a series of holdups and clean-ups of stores. The lone bandit was known to be tall, thin, mounted on a dun stallion of great speed. He played tag with Sheriff Huston, literally speaking. Did the sheriff watch for him at one place—he stole in another. He even raided into town when the sheriff and Parkins were off on a false alarm in the other end of the county and robbed the bank, taking twelve thousand dollars in gold coin and big bills.

Then the lone bandit disappeared. The people murmured. It was the first time a big "killing" had been made in Huston's territory without his showing results on short notice. In fact, so efficient had he been in other years that this one slip seemed big by comparison.

Verne Parkins began to whisper mysteriously and to cast mean hints as to the identity of the lone bandit. He was on fair behavior now, his father having undertaken to pay up some of his gambling debts. It was during such periods of enforced penitence that Verne Parkins lounged around the jail and commended himself to Huston by running errands and indulging in flattery.

Next morning a rider for the Three Bar Three came in on the high lope, with news that rustlers were at work in

the upper end of the county. Branding fires had been found on the open range; an abandoned running iron, made of a straight piece of heavy wire, with a loop in the end, had been found beside one of these little fires that had been made by laying little sticks, wheelwise, on the ground. A few head of cattle, no doubt misbranded, had been run off secretly. Thus reported Miller, of the Three Bar Three.

"Get Verne; we'll take him," Huston told Parkins. The father sent word to Verne's haunts that he was wanted, but he could not be found. So the sheriff and Parkins started back with the Three Bar Three man, leaving word for Verne to follow, if he came back within a few hours.

"I think those rustlers came down from above," the Three Bar Three rider explained. "But they have help from some one in this region, too. We found where one man rode down toward Mesa Brilar. He went right through Chili Derwent's pasture on the flat. We lost his sign in the cattle traces there," Miller added.

"How is Derwent doing?" Huston found himself asking unwittingly.

"Oh, pretty good. Building up his herd. His wife is mighty popular with every one up our way. Your daughter's a mighty fine woman, sheriff."

This reminder that Derwent's wife was his daughter cut the sheriff deeply, and he changed the subject abruptly.

"I wish we had Verne with us," Parkins sighed. "A trip like this'd do him good, get him away from town and those fool friends of his."

Huston did not respond to this leading question, and Parkins was disappointed. He planned, by keeping Verne before Huston's notice, to work him gradually into a deputyship, in case he should feel like retiring.

"I guess we better go right up to Derwent's," the Three Bar Three man suggested. "I can show you there where the sign of the man that started down this way faded out in the cattle traces in Chili's pasture flat. I had an idea we were gettin' warm when that happened."

"I'd rather not," Huston interrupted hastily. "I can run out sign myself a few."

"All right," and Miller put his horse to the high lope, throwing back dust to show how offended he was.

"I guess I'm getting too blamed mean for folks t' live with," Huston said to Parkins.

"Let him go; that Three Bar Three bunch were always biggoty," and Parkins made an excuse that fell upon open ears. Huston soon seemed to have forgotten Miller's decided rebuff, and they rode onward toward the scene of the rustlers' activities with their old-time good humor apparently unruffled.

"Isn't that Miller coming back?" and Parkins pointed to a rider coming around the next bend of the trail above.

"An' some one else, too——" said the sheriff, rising in his stirrups the better to see.

"Man on a big dun hoss—a prisoner, too, by the looks."

They drew off to one side of the trail. Miller, well ahead, came closer in, calling: "Chili Derwent's got one of the rustlers."

"Wha-a-at!" Huston jerked out. His face was set like flint as Parkins whispered hoarsely: "That's Verne he's got—my Verne."

It was Verne, bound, legs under the belly of the horse, minus gun and knife, dejected and crushed. But he threw back his shoulders upon seeing the sheriff and his father.

"What's this, Derwent?" the sheriff demanded.

"After the Three Bar Three riders left word that they'd run rustler sign, I got busy on my own hook. I found where a man had hid out above my home base, and I trailed him this morn-

ing early. Found him working over the brand on one of my calves, using a running iron."

"He's tryin' t' frame me up," Verne whined.

"Thats' a lie; look at the iron in his saddle skirts," said Derwent, pointing to Verne.

"Do you mean t' charge my son with rustlin'?" Verne's father demanded, spurring his horse forward till he could glare into Chili's face.

"I've done it already. Raise that saddle flap an' see if the burns from his running iron don't fit—see if there isn't proof that when he last hid his iron, it was hot and made its own brand on his saddle leather."

Parkins bent over and jerked aside the flap under which the head of the iron was concealed. The iron's loop was somewhat flattened, and the burn on the leather, evidently fresh, fitted that loop perfectly.

"Smell of the leather; the odor of burnt leather hasn't gone out of it yet," Chili urged.

Huston did as he asked, and his face was set like flint against Verne as he swung erect in the saddle again. Parkins, seeing this, turned white. Verne, however, began to speak boldly.

"It's all a frame-up. I was riding up above Derwent's place, going toward Three Bar Three. I heard they'd been after rustlers, and I wanted t' get news for you, sheriff, so I could ride down an' bring you up. Derwent rode onto me, told me t' pitch up, slipped this running iron into my saddle flaps, tied it, and bound me up. He's tryin' t' frame me up."

Derwent laughed loudly. "An' look at his own hoss," Verne went on. "A big dun stallion. The holdup man rode a big dun stallion."

Huston stared at the horse that up till then he had not glanced at closely, having been so taken up with Verne and the charge against him.

"Derwent is the holdup man that's been raising such a ruckus," Verne insisted. "He's in need of a lot of money t' finance that new ranch of his. He's framing me up to throw off suspicion."

"I'd be likely to ride the hoss that I used in my holdups right into public view," Chili suggested with sarcasm.

"Mightn't that holdup expert sold his horse to some one and Chili bought him?" Miller entered into the debate.

"Got a bill of sale for him?" Huston asked.

"Sure. I got him off Mig Del Passo, the hoss gyp."

"When?"

"Last week. Nice hoss, too, if any one should ask you."

"Where is Del Passo now?" Parkins asked jeeringly.

"You know that he drove his cavvy up country last week. No one knows where he is by this time. He's apt t' make Oregon before fall, tradin' hosses all the way."

"Picked out a good one t' alibi on," Huston interposed.

"Look here, Huston," and Derwent, white-lipped, spurred his horse close to that of the sheriff. "I thought this charge of Verne's was not made seriously, but because he was sore at being brought in by me on my charge. Do you give his charge credence?"

"As much as I give yours against him," returned Huston hotly and injudiciously.

"If you weren't my wife's father, you'd eat those words," and his voice was as low and as clear as a bell.

"Don't let that stop you, none," said Huston savagely, edging his horse back.

"I don't aim t' bring woe on Luella. If we fight, she'll lose her father or husband; maybe both; take the prisoner; I'll be in whenever he's tried," he added, turning his horse as if to go back home.

Parkins swung down and cut the bonds of Verne, who began to smile.

The three, Huston, Parkins, and his son, rode away laughing.

Miller spurred after them and asked Huston to rein in. Derwent remained back, where they had left him.

"I'm sayin' here and now," Miller shot at Huston, "that I think there's a lot to what Chili says about Verne here. Don't let the fact of his being Parkins' son make it easier for him. If he gets away, you'll lose the support of Three Bar Three this year when the votes are counted."

"That's all right, far as it goes," Huston replied hotly. "Three Bar Three knows where she can go to, pronto."

Miller drew back his horse, boiling with rage. Then came a clatter of hoofs and Derwent, his stallion with the dun coat springing forward easily, was with them, speaking rapidly.

"I won't let him get away with that charge against me. I'll bring in that lone bandit in a week, and prove that he's a liar. Then I'll tell Verne so, in public, Parkins. You know what that'll mean! I won't fight my father-in-law or you, for you're too old a man for me to fight with. I'd get no credit if I killed you a whole lot."

"Old! Me old!" Parkins spluttered.

"Don't mind him, paw," Verne put in. "He wouldn't talk that a way, if he didn't know that I am stiffened up from being bound."

"Your laigs were bound, but your hands and tongue are plenty limber," Chili came back.

"I want this charge against me cleared up before I get into any gun-throwing scrapes," Verne said quickly. "I might get killed, and I don't want t' die with any stain on my father's honor."

"That's dead right, boy," his father said.

"All right, have it that way," Chili came back with. "But I'll turn in that bandit, just t' prove that I'm not the man."

Huston did not answer. He felt at disadvantage for the first time in his long career as a public officer. He whispered orders to Parkins and Verne, and they rode away toward Mesa Brilar.

"My guess is that Verne'll be out of jail in a day or two," Miller offered.

"Mine, too. I wouldn't ask his dad to turn the empty-haid in for trial, though. I wouldn't do it for my son, if I had one. Verne's the tool of those bigger thieves. I hope he gets away and stays away, that's all."

CHAPTER IV.

CHILI PLAYS A HUNCH.

CHILI had peculiar reasons, all his own, for not caring to tell Luella the details of his meeting with the sheriff and Parkins. He merely told her, when he got back home, that he had met the sheriff on the way down to town and had given the prisoner to him. He passed off the meeting lightly, kissed Luella, and rode off, telling her that he might be away a few days, as he had some business to attend to that would take him off his own range. He had been riding away quite a bit of late, Luella thought, looking up horses to add to his remuda, so she did not worry.

After getting out of sight of the house, however, Chili circled the ranch and rode toward Mesa Brilar. The big dun stallion went along springily, his fetlocks all but touching the ground at the instant of greatest depression. Chili rode with a light rein, swaying with every motion of his mount. Sandy Land, his old top horse, he kept for cow work; this new favorite was for riding the trails.

Chili was playing a hunch. The sudden disappearance of the lone bandit, the silence of him, showed, according to Chili's notions, one of two things —that he was either gone for good, or merely keeping quiet until people should become careless, when he would turn a bigger trick than ever.

The opportunity for the big trick was at hand, Chili knew. He had heard that the Silver Bow mine was to send down its monthly clean-up that day, on the stage that would pass through Mesa Brilar. The old stage driver, Hank Yuocum, had told Chili the secret, as he had stopped to water his horses a few days before. Hank and Yuocum were old-time friends, and Hank often gave Chili information that he did not give to any one else.

Chili knew that news of the big shipment might leak out in other ways. The lone bandit, lurking in wayside drinking holes and paying for tips liberally, might well come into possession of news worth while. Now Chili was playing a warm hunch. He meant to have that bandit if he had to trail him all that year, in order to wipe out the suspicion that had been raised against himself

The stage was late. Uusually due in Mesa Brilar about six, a broken whiffletree had delayed the trip. Hank Yuocum had made the required repairs, hewing out a new "tree" from a bit of timber picked up at random and not overstrong. He had to go easy on it on the upgrades, for fear of snapping it. So the stage was late.

Rounding the last turn before reaching town, a big horse barred the way. Hank started to reach for his sawed-off gun, but a shot smashed into the butt of it, alongside his hand as his hand touched the pistol grip of the weapon. Just then another shot sounded and the bandit pitched forward. His horse started to run, and another horse shot into view beside the trail; the swishing of a true lass rope was heard, and the running horse was checked.

"Who're you?" old Hank called.

The man who had arrived so opportunely came alongside, the now subdued horse of the bandit dancing a bit at the end of the rope.

"Chili Derwent; though I'd just end this lone bandit business," he said.

They swung down from the stage and held a lantern over the face of the stranger. No one knew him. He was dead. The horse Chili had captured was a big, dun stallion!

"Take that hoss and body in and tell Sheriff Huston that he knows now that I'm not a liar," Chili said quietly, riding away.

"There's rewards out for this hombre," Hank reminded him.

"All right, tell Huston he knows where t' send them," said Chili, riding away quickly.

The arrival of the stage, with its news, sent a thrill of excitement through Mesa Brilar. It was brought to the jail by Verne Parkins, out on bail and apparently not in much danger of being prosecuted.

"You say this lone gent tried it again and that Chili shot him up a whole lot?" Huston asked, ceasing to rowel the top of his sturdy desk with his spurs.

"That's what Hank Yuocum says," returned the other, with a mean emphasis on the "says."

"Now, don't go casting any aspersions on Hank; he was tellin' the truth before you got the pink off the tips of your ears," Huston warned.

Verne stared at that. He had been noticing that Huston was not exactly warm to him all day. In fact, Parkins senior and Huston had had several arguments over Verne's case during the day and early evening.

"This proves that you told one lie, about Chili's being the bandit," Huston told Verne. "Mebbe you told another about your not being with the rustlers."

Verne wished his own father had been there to back him up. He made some slighting remarks, and edged out onto the street.

What Huston was thinking was this: When it came time for election, Chili would have much support that he had

lacked before, on the strength of this exploit. He would have sympathy due to a man unjustly accused by another. Huston knew that Miller would not fail to spread the true story of that meeting on the trail, when Chili had been accused wrongfully, yet had kept his temper, afterward making good in regard to the bandit. This thought worried Huston exceedingly.

Another thing worried him next morning! The town turned out to bury the bandit, whom no one recognized. The town turned out—all but Verne Parkins. He had disappeared!

Miller, in for the funeral, heard of this and told of how Chili had been accused, and of the charge against Verne, and the townsfolk, knowing how easy it had been made for Verne to get away, murmured loudly against their sheriff—for the first time in his long career.

CHAPTER V.

VERNE'S MESSAGE.

THE busy months passed. Huston yearned to see Luella, but she kept away from town. Once in a while when Huston tried to quiz some of the town women who had been up to visit Luella, they smiled at him in a peculiar manner and refused to talk much. This made Huston more than ever angry.

The time for the annual shrievalty primary was at hand again. Chili Derwent was riding hard, electioneering. For a time Huston, like Hector of old, "remained in his tent," that is to say, he refused to ride for votes. Then he became frightened and began to seek for support everywhere. Parkins, more venomous than ever against Derwent because people continued to twit him about Verne's disappearance, did not fail to pour acid into the raw wounds of family unpleasantness.

The night for the annual Pecan Flat political rally rolled around. Rumors that Chili intended to make an important speech there reached Huston, through Parkins.

"I'll be right there, same's last year," the sheriff made glad the bitter heart of his old deputy.

And he was there, towering up on his horse, refusing to "light down and be comfortable," in response to Chili's smiling invitation.

Huston could feel in the air a growing favor for Chili and a coolness toward him. This angered him.

Chili's speech avoided personal attack upon his opponent. He did enlarge upon old Huston's wealth, his many terms, and his, Derwent's ambition to be the sheriff "before I'm old and useless to man or woman."

"You hinting that I'm useless?" Huston blared out, rising in his saddle.

"I ain't mentioned any names yet, but when the primary's held, you'll sure acknowledge that you've been kidded right good," Chili replied. Several laughed at that, among them a number of women.

Huston rode away, out of temper. A little laugh followed him as he went.

Parkins, sitting in the jail office, read for the second time the note that had been slipped in his hand on the street a few moments before by a Mexican lad who had scurried away before Parkins could recognize him.

DAD: I'm all in, hungry, dog tired, hiding in the hay pile in the wagon yard. I've got to have help. VERNE.

Huston was out somewhere, electioneering. It was the day of the primary. The voting would be held that night, in the wagon yard as usual.

Parkins went out, as if for a casual stroll. In the wagon yard he lounged over to the pile of hay bales. He found where there was a hole in the pile, where a loose bale had been yanked out by a man too lazy to climb atop the mass and throw off a bale from above.

Where that small bale had been dragged from the face of the pile, Verne Parkins had worked his short, squat form inward out of sight, squeezing bales back and to one side to make a cubbyhole, at the end of which he now was, dejected and forlorn. Parkins stood, as if leaning against the pile, and that gave Verne a chance to crawl forward and whisper into his father's ear, and Parkins could talk in very low tones out of a stingy mouth corner, in reply to his erring son's phrases in explanation of his present plight.

The gist of his tale was that he had been gambling again, was "wanted" because some one suspected he had been with certain wild men in San Geronimo who had shot up the town and injured the marshal there. This "shooting up" had been without provocation, and the gang was wanted with a vengeance. Verne needed money to get out of the region and let the affair blow over.

"We're not in a good way here," his father informed him. "I think Huston's going t' lose this election. That'll mean that I'll be out as deputy."

"Is it that bad? Why not do something," suggested Verne craftily.

"Do what?"

"Work a few extra ballots into that old box before the voting starts.

"Huston wouldn't hear to it," answered Parkins shortly.

"Don't let him know of it. Why not get hold of extra votes for Chili Derwent. Slip them in. Then claim that the count is wrong. Demand a recount. They'll all stay t' hear the result. Or have them counted as they file past, by two good tally men from some reliable cattle outfits. If there's, say, eight hundred people voting, and eight hundred and fifty votes in the box and Derwent has the majority, and we can get the Huston people to line up for a count, it will show, on the face of it, that Derwent put fifty votes in by fraud; the election will be void, and Huston will hold over till a new election is held. Public sentiment will blame Derwent for the fraud, and he'll be overwhelmingly defeated."

Parkins was silent for a moment. His heaving shoulders told of extreme agitation. "I don't like t' do a thing like that."

"Well, all right; let it go; Derwent will win. You'll be minus a job. I'll be a jailbird."

Parkins made some bitter comments in mouth-twisting whispers. Verne argued his case adroitly. Presently Parkins went away.

CHAPTER VI.

MESA HERMOSAS'S NEW SHERIFF.

CAUCUS night again! All day long outfits had been riding in for the voting. The town was full of people, for men, women, children, and hound dogs had arrived. It was to be the region's biggest political event. Derwent had literally combed the ranges for voters; Huston had done the same. Parkins, moody and silent, waited for the voting to begin. He whispered to Huston.

"Ask to have two tally men, that every one will trust, keep count of the people that file past the ballot box and make sure that the votes counted tally with the votes cast."

"Suspect anything? The tellers will 'tend t' that if asked. It's part of their duties, but they generally only inspect the ballot box before voting, and count the votes afterward."

"I hold to my point," went on Parkins doggedly. "Listen."

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Chili Derwent was making a speech. "I regret to say that my supply of ballots has run out. The lot I had printed I thought would be enough, but a pack of them I lost somewhere t'-day. They were in my pistol pocket, but they must've joggled out. Some of you may have t'

write your names on slips of paper and vote them. It will be legal."

"Gettin' his alibi ready in advance," Parkins whispered to Huston.

"Do you mean——" Huston was beginning.

"Watch, and keep your gun ready," admonished Parkins, pointing to the place where the ballot box was to be set up. Old Able Iswald was showing the people that the ballot box was empty. He did this by turning the box upside down, then rapping on it to show that nothing could be jarred out of it. He performed this perfunctorily, for it was looked upon as a formality. Then he turned the box back upright and put on the cover, snapping the hasp in place.

The lines formed; people began to file past the ballot box.

While the people were waiting, Parkins circulated around, whispering suspicions of impending fraud. He went to the old-timers and mouthed inflaming phrases to them quietly.

The old-timers began to edge toward the place where the tellers were counting the votes out onto the top of a second box—a big one brought forth and used as a table.

Able Iswald secured silence by banging on the box with the butt of his gun.

"Ladies and gents: The whole number of votes cast is 756, of which Huston receives 351; Derwent receives 405. I declare Derwent the nominee, the winner of this great primary, and any one that goes against him at the polls is no friend of mine!"

There was a moment of silence, then Huston shouted: "There are only 726 qualified voters here; where did those extra votes come from?"

Pandemonium broke loose. Excited whisperings were heard.

"I demand that the votes be counted again; that——" Derwent began.

Huston interrupted him. "I had two good tally men, Anse Wheeler and Charlie Barton, that you-all know, keep track of the voters as they lined up t' vote. Men, how many voters passed the ballot box?" he called to his tally men.

"Just 726," they answered in unison.

"I accept their count; they're good cowmen and wouldn't tally wrong," Derwent's ringing voice came out over the increasing tumult. "Let's have a recount."

"Better look for extra ballots; or let's line up the voters, according as they voted; that will give a line on what's wrong," Parkins suggested, hardly able to restrain his jubilation.

"Run them past the tally men; every one declare how he voted as he passes," Huston suggested.

This caught the fancy of the crowd, and soon the two lines had formed and began to pass the tally men, who called off the count, in true range-land style; ending with:

"We find that Huston has 351 that claim they voted for him, and that Derwent has only 370 willing to say they voted for him," Wheeler announced.

"Any one go away?" Derwent asked.

"No one left the wagon yard; I had guards put on the gate as soon as I smelled mice," Huston blared out. He was worked up to a state of dangerous excitement by now, and things were looking squally all around. Men were muttering; women were whimpering, and children were beginning to sob.

"A few went out before we got t' the gate," a guard said.

"You had some of your people vote by written slips because all your printed ones were used up; how many printed slips did you have?" Parkins suddenly demanded.

"I had about 350 printed; I spoiled a few taking them for cigarette papers," Derwent answered. "Tryin' to roll them in the dark. They're thin, about the size of cigarette papers."

"Then you had less than 350?" And they waited for his answer intently.

W 8 C

"I lost that bunch, as I said——"

"Let's see how many printed votes Derwent's got; how many written ones," Parkins demanded.

This suited the crowd, and Derwent called for the answer quickly. The tellers began to count, and the people crowded closer and closer in. The old-timers rolled their eyes wildly as Parkins whispered again and again.

The count was completed again, Wheeler declared it:

"We find that all of Huston's votes are printed, agreeing with the number of people that voted for him! The number of written votes for Derwent is sixty; printed votes for Derwent 345!"

"Then all his printed votes, except the few he spoiled, are in that box," Parkins accused. "Who put in the pack he says he lost? They are the votes that are extra in here. I charge Derwent with fraud, and we claim the primary election for Huston."

Huston stormed about. Ugly words were passed back and forth. It seemed that some one would do something hasty, and that shots would fly wildly. Even if no bullet found a fatal billet in human flesh, the horses, hundreds inside that tight inclosure, might stampede, killing women and children, if not men, in their madness.

"Put those kids on that hay pile," one anxious mother whispered, with the quick wit of the range woman, seeing that if a stampede occurred, the children, up there, would be safer than if on the ground or in some wagon likely to be overturned.

In a moment many children were cast up on high. Eager to see everything, they stood up, undaunted. A few timid children whimpered.

"Who was to profit by that big boost in Derwent votes?" Huston was demanding over the tumult that now increased as men tensed for a possible break.

"Derwent, of course."

"How do we know but what you people found my lost printed votes and stuck them into the box on the sly, so the election would be nullified," Derwent suddenly demanded.

"You charging me with fraud?" Huston's menacing voice cut into the ensuing silence like a keen-edged blade.

"You've charged me with fraud already," replied Derwent, not giving ground.

"Derwent!" And the sheriff of Mesa leaned forward, his face a mask of fury. Men on all sides began to reach for their guns. In a second the wagon yard would be a billowing sea of fire, flame, shuttling death.

"Father!"

It was Luella Derwent. She sprang out of a buckboard in which she and Chili had driven into town. It had been standing on the outer fringe of the press. Now she was forcing her way forward, bending over as she walked. Men made way for her with unusual celerity. The sheriff, with glaring eyes, watched her come.

"Don't come no sympathy game," Huston was beginning, when she was before him, had straightened up, and revealed to him the bundle in the crook of her arm.

"Here is my first-born child; for his sake do not begin a fight here that will bring woe upon the whole region," she pleaded. She swept back the covering from the pink-and-white face and the baby, looking up and seeing the light of the bright flares, cooed and chuckled. The sound of it was heard by every one, so silent had all become.

"You know, dad," she said bravely, "Chili joked that he'd kid you——"

"Sympathy—I've been defrauded——" the sheriff began, when a shriek from a group of children on the hay pile was heard. They had crowded to one side, peering over, in the effort to see everything. So doing, they had

caused the outer tier of bales to topple, and now it came, crashing down, and as it struck the ground a chorus of infantile yells resounded, in which one bass voice was mingled.

"Help; I'm killed; I'm crushed in the stummick."

This diversion drew attention, yet the situation remained strained. Derwent pushed forward. Huston eyed him sternly. Luella pushed in between them, holding up the baby. The bass voice went on hoarsely.

"I'm dying; send for a minister; I did it. I put those extra votes in the ballot box. I saw Derwent drop them when he was fishing for cig-a-reet papers on the street. I put them in the box, catching them under a splinter so they'd not drop out when old Iswald turned the box up, as he always does. Huston didn't know a thing about it. I'm dying!"

"That's Verne Parkins," some one called. "He's confessed stuffing the ballot box, but he ain't hurt bad."

"Dad!" Luella spoke softly. "What should you say now? We knew we had you beat, so I brought the baby to soften the heart of you."

"Me," and the sheriff of Mesa Brilar jammed his gun back into its holster, he having partly drawn it in the midst of the excitement. "Me? I'll say this: I'm a fool. And I'm glad t' be kidded this a way. Nice kid, too; looks like me. Folks," he added loudly, "listen: I'm going to begin my campaign for election to-morrow—a campaign for the unanimous election of Chili Derwent. If there's a vote cast against him in this region, I'll find the everlasting galoot that casts it and he'll think he's his grandma's colander before I get through with him. I introduce the next sheriff of Mesa Brilar, Chili Dewent, father of the finest maverick ever on these ranges. I've made a tool of myself listening to Parkins, but that's all past, and I want to say that I've been whipped fair by a better politician than I am, and I've been kidded good and plenty. The next sheriff of Mesa Hermosa, folks, Chili Derwent!"

A burst of cheering resounded as Huston, Luella, and Chili suddenly were clasped together in a mutual embrace, all showering kisses on the face of the cooing boy whose coming into the world had given the old sheriff a balm that would take away at once and for all time the sting of his political defeat and accompanying humiliation. Huston got free and called out suddenly:

"I'm not going t' raise any ruckus over this election, folks; I'm goin', from now on, t' devote my time t' raising this new citizen up to fear God, honor the flag, and—shoot straight."

WASHINGTON'S BAD FIRE SEASON

WASHINGTON had a bad fire season during the past autumn. Smoke for many weeks obscured the Olympic Mountains, the peaks of the Cascades, and even the battleships in Puget Sound. Rangers and fire fighters of the United States Forest Service as well as the fire-fighting agencies of the State and the timber owners' organizations had a busy season fighting the enemy. The weather bureau has installed a number of machines to record the weather's moods, which will prove of great help to the forest rangers. Machines have been installed at ten points in Oregon, ten in Washington, and sixteen in British Columbia.

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SHORTY L.—I have settled the matter with the C. and T. Union, and have kept everything a secret. I intend to return the money that was borrowed, and will help you even more than Bert, although he is with you now. If you want a divorce, I will give it to you, even though I love you. I have moved and am working. Please let me hear from you as soon as possible. Your wife, C. E. L., care of this magazine.

LEDFORD, DOLLY.—She left Wichita, Kansas, on January 21, 1923. An old friend would like to hear from her. Billie, care of this magazine.

STAMP, MARY and GEORGE.—I would like to get in touch with my aunt and uncle, who lived in Chicago, Illinois, in 1895. My aunt's maiden name was Caldwell. Any one knowing their present address will kindly inform Mabel, care of this magazine.

IRWIN, ARCHIE.—Please write to your father, who is anxious to see you. William B. Irwin, 61 Laughton Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada.

PAYETTE, JULIE.—I love you and want you to return. Please let me hear from you. Pal, care of this magazine.

GETSON.—I would like to hear from any of my following relatives: Lulu, Hannah, Annie, Carrie, Amelia, and Christ Getson. Please send all news to Mrs. Mary Seesler, 511 Third Street, Union Hill, New Jersey.

GARLAND, CLARK.—His home is in Waco, Texas. Please communicate with your old buddy, who was with you on the U. S. S. "North Dakota." Tom White, 541 Fischrupp Avenue, Whiting, Indiana.

BELS, ARTHUR.—Please write to your mother, who has some papers for you to sign. Any one knowing his present whereabouts will kindly notify his lonely mother. Mrs. M. M. Schnoor, Box 70, Casper, Wyoming.

HOOGAN, HAROLD VICTOR.—He is twenty-three years of age, five feet eight inches in height, has dark hair, brown eyes, and weighs one hundred and forty pounds. In June, 1923, he left his home at 234 Broadway, Buffalo, New York. Any news will be welcomed by Mrs. Alice M. Hoogan, 4 Victoria Terrace, Montreal Street, Kingston, Ontario, Canada.

DIFANI, ROBERT V.—He was in St. Louis, Missouri, on March 17, 1924, and was intending to go out West. Any news concerning him will be appreciated. Mike G. Montoya, Rand, Colorado.

STEWART, LORAN.—He attended school at Menlo, Washington, and in 1918 he left his friend, George Herman, at Moore, Washington, to return to the orphans' home near Seattle, Washington. Any information will be welcomed by Dorothy Cole, 4211 East Lee Street, Seattle, Washington.

SHIELDS, JOE.—He formerly came from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and served in the army in the Fourteenth Infantry, at Fort Davis, Canal Zone, from 1920 to 1923. A friend would like to find him, and will be grateful for his present address. Max Stilnick, Company B, Thirty-third Infantry, Fort Clayton, Canal Zone, Panama.

WILCOX, PAUL.—He lived at one time at Fleming, Kentucky. Please write, as there is important news awaiting you. M. Taylor, 1401 Cockrell Street, St. Louis, Missouri.

CASEY, JOHN.—He served as a sergeant during the World War in the Forty-ninth Company, Fifth Regiment, United States Marine Corps. His home is in Portsmouth, Virginia. Any of his friends who know his present whereabouts will confer a favor by notifying Mrs. Ethel Hughes Wright, 1318½ Fourth Avenue, Huntington, West Virginia.

LAIR, RAMONA.—She taught school in Muskogee, Oklahoma, about four years ago. Please send all information to Former Student, care of this magazine.

FORUST, ALBERT.—He married a woman by the name of Elizabeth Taft, in Des Moines, Iowa, but later they separated. If any of their relatives or children read this they will confer a favor by communicating with Lydia Merckling, General Delivery, Okmulgee, Oklahoma.

KINKAID, JOSEPH C.—He was born in Caldwell, Idaho, but was last seen in 1912. He is now twenty-two years of age. His sister, Ida, would like to get in touch with him, and will welcome his present address. Mrs. Ida Casper, 8125 Woodstock Avenue, Portland, Oregon.

BAKER, BARTON H.—He is five feet eight inches in height, has curly red hair, gray eyes, false front teeth, walks with a slight limp, and weighs one hundred and twenty-five pounds. In October, 1923, he was in the Government Hospital, at Sheridan, Wyoming. A friend is very eager to find him, and will appreciate any news. M. B., care of this magazine.

MARTIN, ALFRED LEA.—He was last seen at 1251 North Clark Street, Chicago, Illinois. Please notify D. M. O., care of this magazine.

ALPHIN, WALTER.—He was living in Wilmington, North Carolina. Any one knowing his present whereabouts will kindly write to Sister, care of this magazine.

YORK, J. M.—He was the president of the York-Whitney Company in Boston, Massachusetts. Please send all helpful news to Clara, care of this magazine.

FERRY, M. M.—He is six feet in height, forty years of age, has dark-brown hair, gray eyes, and weighs one hundred and seventy-five pounds. He was working in Detroit, Michigan, some time ago. His father is ill and heart-broken over his departure. Any one knowing his present whereabouts will kindly notify Mrs. A. Ferry, Box 324, Baird, Texas.

DUNAWAY, ROBERT and EDWARD.—They are the sons of Will Dunaway, who died in Butte, Montana, several years ago. One of them served in the army, but is now supposed to be living in the West. Their cousin would like to hear from them. Ollie Light, Box 526, Morrisonville, Illinois.

ATTENTION.—I would like to hear from any of my buddies who served in Company L, Forty-fifth Infantry, from 1919 to 1920. Francis Lewis, 5014 Stiles Street, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

BAKER, CAPTAIN JAMES J.—He was on the U. S. S. "Cotati." Please get in touch with an old friend, who is eager to see you. R. Grunnelle, Central Hotel, Hoboken, New Jersey.

WANTY, JOSEPH.—He is forty-six years of age, and was last seen in Hunter, North Dakota, twenty-seven years ago. Please notify Hilda I. McDonald, Box 624, The Pas, Manitoba, Canada.

McDONALD, Mrs. JOHN J.—She is sixty-seven years of age, and was living in Olga, North Dakota, twenty-five years ago. Any one knowing her present whereabouts will confer a favor by writing to H. M., care of this magazine.

HACK, E. A.—Your uncle is dead. Please write to me for information, as we do not know where you are living. Mrs. Viola Watson, 3408 West Hoffman, Spokane, Washington.

DU MILLER, HENRY or HANK.—He is of medium build, has a light complexion, and walks with a slight limp. It is supposed that he is either in Ontario, Canada, or in northern or western Michigan. His mother is ill and worried over his absence, and would like to see him. Any one knowing his present whereabouts will kindly write to Mrs. Mary Du Miller, 713 West Sixth Street, Monroe, Michigan.

ATTENTION.—I would like to get in touch with Cleo Wilson, Cecil Stepp, and Jesse Roach, who served with me in Battery F, Ninth Field Artillery, at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, during 1920. The army records show the following home addresses: Wilson, 158 East Main Street, Trinidad, Colorado; Stepp, 208 Twenty-fourth Street, Denver, Colorado; Roach, 170 Maple Avenue, Los Angeles, California. Efforts to reach them at these addresses have failed. Any one having any news will kindly communicate with Raymond W. Martin, R. R. 2, Cambridge, Illinois.

GARRETT, IRENE.—She was attending the Girls' Industrial School, in Chillicothe, Missouri. She is five feet two inches in height, has blue eyes, brown hair, and weighs one hundred and ten pounds. Please return home as soon as you see this, as they are all worried about you. George Dewey Thorpe, 2013 North Broadway, St. Louis, Missouri.

JACKSON.—I would like to get in touch with my brothers and sister, Elmer, Jim, Walter, and Anna, who lived in Brookside, Ohio, several years ago. Any one knowing their whereabouts will kindly notify their youngest sister, Sarah. Mrs. S. Bellville, 916 John Street, Marietta, Ohio.

FRANK.—Please come home at once, as mother is seriously ill and is eager to see you. You need not see me if you don't want to. Ada, Blackfork, Ohio.

FENTON, GEORGE R.—He lived at 626 West Fourth Street, Cincinnati, Ohio, and was working for the Yellow Taxi Cab Company. A friend is anxious to find him, and will appreciate any news concerning him. C. Holderfield, 7½ North Maple Avenue, Greensburg, Pennsylvania.

ATTENTION.—It has been reported that a man wearing an artificial limb was killed in Ohio or West Virginia. He has light hair, gray eyes, and a fair complexion. Any information will be received by Justice, care of this magazine.

SUGGS, JEWEL.—Please let me know what happened to Jack. Write to me at once. Edward Coriale, care of this magazine.

BILL.—Please send me your address at once. I sent a package to the last place you lived in, but I was notified that you had left. By the time you read this I will be back in Hopewell, Virginia. I send you my love. Goldie.

PACKER, F. S.—He was last heard of at Calgary, Alberta, Canada, in 1913. Any one knowing his present address will confer a favor by writing to R. M. H., care of this magazine.

HETZLER, B.—He left Cowdrey, Colorado, on December 22, 1923. He is five feet seven inches in height, has dark-brown hair and eyes, is crippled in the left leg, and has the right thumb and finger cut off at the first joint. Any one knowing his whereabouts will kindly write to Mrs. Ida Hetzler, 3333 Mead Street, Denver, Colorado.

C. A. M., who left Baltimore, Maryland, on November 29, 1924, for Wilmington, Delaware, but was last seen at the West Philadelphia Station, Pennsylvania. Please write to your friend, who is eager to see you. S. P. M.

WYMAN.—Howard is ill in the General Hospital, Kansas City, Missouri, and expects to be there four weeks. Can you come or write? Mrs. B. M. D., Kansas City, Missouri.

STIENBECK, CHARLES.—He was born in Bridgeport, Connecticut, and is now twenty-six years of age. His mother, Elizabeth Comenzind, died, and his father remarried and went South. Any one having any information will kindly write to Mrs. G. D., care of this magazine.

COFFEY, VIRGINIA.—She was last heard of in Arkansas. Any one having any news will kindly write to Jack Coffey, Wortham, Texas.

BRILHART, CHARLES.—He was married in Los Angeles, California, in 1902. He is five feet in height, has light hair, blue eyes, and is of heavy build. It is supposed that he worked in a machine shop in Newport, Virginia. Please send all information to Mrs. H. H. Brilhart, 1180 Bittner Court, Akron, Ohio.

McATEER, CLIFF.—In 1924 he was working with the Bridge Construction Company at Glenrock, Wyoming. Please write to your mother, who is worried over your absence. Mrs. E. Brennecke, 4017 Delmar Boulevard, St. Louis, Missouri.

SIMONS, MAGGIE.—I would like to get in touch with my sister, who was taken away by my father when she was three years of age. She is now twenty-six years old. Any one knowing her present whereabouts will confer a favor by notifying Leonard L. Simons, Box 122, Alloway, New Jersey.

SHINEY, FRANK and **DOLLY.**—Dolly's maiden name was Whitt, and she formerly came from Missouri. About a year ago they were living in Casper, Wyoming, but have not been heard of since. Please send all news to Mrs. B. S., care of this magazine.

KNIGHT, CAROL CARPENTER.—She was living at 703½ Pacific Avenue, Tacoma, Washington. An old friend is very eager to find her, and will appreciate any news. Sadie E. Davis, Box 404, East Jordan, Michigan.

FRED H. H.—Please write to me at the old address as soon as you see this. Your wife.

DAVIS, CLAYTON and **CECIL.**—They are sixteen and fourteen years of age respectively, and were last heard of in Washington, District of Columbia. Their father took them away from their mother in 1919, and taught them to believe that she was dead. Any one knowing their present address will kindly notify Sadie Davis, Box 404, East Jordan, Michigan.

TURNER or **CLARK, A. C.**—He was working for the Skelly Oil Company, in Wilson, Oklahoma, later went to Tulsa, Oklahoma, but then returned to Wilson. An old friend would like to hear from him, and will appreciate any news. Y. S. C., care of this magazine.

PIERCE, AUSTIN.—He was formerly with the medical department, in the United States army, in Sibera. Please write to an old friend, who is anxious to see you. C. L. Pierce, Tela, Spanish Honduras, Central America.

JOHNSTON, W. F.—He is fifty-four years of age, has light hair, walks with a limp, and weighs one hundred and thirty-five pounds. At one time he lived in Paducah, Kentucky, and Alabama, but was last heard of in North Dakota in 1913. His brother would like to hear from him or from any one that knows his present whereabouts. S. C. Johnston, 2201½ Morris Avenue, Birmingham, Alabama.

NORAMOR, GILBERT E.—Please write to me at once, and do not send anything but your post-office address. George, care of this magazine.

M. L. G.—Please let me hear from you at once, as I have some news for you. Jennie.

MORAN, THOMAS.—He was born in Passaic, New Jersey, lived for some time in Brooklyn, New York, but was last heard of in Atlanta, Georgia. Any one knowing his present whereabouts will confer a favor by writing to R. F., care of this magazine.

COVERT, CASPER or **GEORGE.**—He left Califon, New Jersey, twelve years ago. His daughter would like to find him, and will welcome any information concerning him. Leah Covert, 13 Bryan Place, Jersey City, New Jersey.

LILLIE, JASPER LOWRIE.—He is an automobile mechanic, and was living in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, fifteen years ago. His brother is very anxious to get in touch with him, and will be grateful for any news. Robert Lillie, 485 Lake Shore Road, Grosse Pointe Shores, Michigan.

ROFF, BILLIE.—She was living in Seattle, Washington, eight months ago. Please communicate with an old friend. Tex, care of this magazine.

MARTIN, G. L.—He is sometimes called Marty. Please write to an old friend who has not heard from you since you were in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, and were leaving for Texas. She still loves you and is eager to hear from you. Susie Taylor, General Delivery, Tulsa, Oklahoma.

BRATT, JOHN or **J. H. W.**—Please write, as we miss you. We are living in Bangor, Maine, and a word from you will be more than welcome. Your mother, Mrs. J. A. B.

GEREMITA, PETER.—He left Italy six years ago. A friend would like to hear from him, as he has important news for him. Frank Cama, 567 Winthrop Avenue, New Haven, Connecticut.

STEER, DAVID.—He came to the United States in 1913, and was last heard of in Cleveland, Ohio. He has blue eyes and a fair complexion. Any one who knows his present whereabouts will confer a favor by writing to Mrs. S., care of this magazine.

GREEN, MYRTLE.—She is thirty-eight years of age, has black hair and eyes, and weighs one hundred and fifty pounds. Please write to her daughter, Mrs. Goldie Black, 504½ East Douglas Avenue, Wichita, Kansas.

HAYES, WARD LeROY.—He is five feet ten inches in height, forty-three years of age, has light hair and blue eyes. He was last seen in east New Jersey and Michigan. Please write to his sister, Mrs. Maude L. Ewing, Route 7, Country Home Estate, Spokane, Washingotn.

MINA.—Why don't you write? I am married and have a baby boy. Mother is not married yet. C. wants to get a divorce if he can find you. We all love you. Your sister, Myrtle, care of this magazine.

DUNMAN, JOHN A.—He was living in Nashville, Tennessee, some time ago, but has not been heard of since. I am heartbroken over his disappearance, and will be grateful for any helpful information. Bertha, care of this magazine.

McKIM, JESSE LEE.—He is six feet two inches in height, forty-three years of age, has black hair, and weighs one hundred and ninety pounds. He left his home about two years ago, and is probably living in Norwalk, Ohio. Kindly notify his sister, Mrs. D. T. Marsh, 621 North Main Street, Dayton, Ohio.

WEST, formerly of San Diego, California. Her husband is in the navy, and they were last seen in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Please send all information to J. C. Walker, 561 Tenth Street, San Diego, California.

SPONANGLE, HELEN.—She left Braxton, West Virginia, on August 25, 1922, but was last heard of in Roanoke, West Virginia. Please notify C. E. B., care of this magazine.

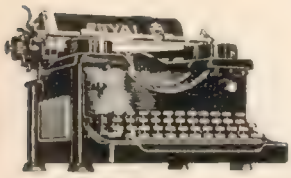
BULLIONS, JAMES.—He was living in Deer Lodge, Montana, on June 15, 1924. He came from England about a year ago and was employed in Canada until this spring. He is tall and well built, has brown hair, blue eyes, and is forty years of age. Please write to Mrs. E. Denny, 431 Third Street, Northeast, Calgary, Alberta, Canada.

SANDERS, STELLA, CORA, JOHN.—They were placed in an orphans' home in St. Louis, Missouri. Any one who knows their present whereabouts will kindly notify their sister, Mrs. Mary Paxson, Route 3, Grant City, Missouri.

ATTENTION.—Any one who has any information about the following men who served with me in Midland, Michigan, from June, 1918, to January, 1919, will please write to me. Their names are: Earl Varner, John Westgatg, Jack Agnew, Joe Schnel, John Brendle, O'Brien, Dornbusch, Kliugeman. Send all information to Shorty Laughlin, 1226 South Flower Street, Los Angeles, California.

LANTZ, ALTA.—She lived in Salt Lake City, Utah, two years ago. A friend is very eager to get in touch with her, and will appreciate all helpful information. Royal W. Hobbs, 761 South 4 West Street, Salt Lake City, Utah.

Private Secretaries of FAMOUS MEN



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Concentrated in every cake of Fleischmann's Yeast are millions of tiny yeast-plants, alive and active. At once they go to work—invigorating the whole system, clearing the skin, aiding digestion, strengthening the intestinal muscles and making them healthy and active.

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(Miss Katherine Fitzgibbon, Denver, Colo.)

Dissolve one cake in a glass of water
(just hot enough to drink)

before breakfast and at bedtime. Fleischmann's Yeast, when taken this way, is especially effective in overcoming or preventing constipation. Or eat 2 or 3 cakes a day—spread on bread or crackers—dissolved in fruit juices or milk—or eat it plain.

Fleischmann's Yeast for Health comes only in the tinfoil package—it cannot be purchased in tablet form. All grocers have it. Start eating it today! You can order several cakes at a time, for Yeast will keep fresh in a cool, dry place for two or three days.

Write for a free copy of our latest booklet on Yeast for Health: Health Research Dept. Z-14, The Fleischmann Company, 701 Washington Street, New York.

"I am an ex-British naval man and have lived in Canada eighteen years. Soon after my arrival I commenced to suffer from indigestion. For days I drank water only or soup and became so irritable was a source of annoyance to all whom I came in contact with. Having tried almost every drug advertised for indigestion commenced taking your now famous yeast cakes three daily. Result: No Indigestion—three square meals a day, splendid appetite, and feeling as fit as a fiddle strung to concert pitch."

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The New Pettijohn's is selected Whole Wheat—one of the most digestible and nourishing of all the kinds of grain.

It is pre-cooked, processed to develop the flavor, rolled, and delicately toasted. It cooks *through* and *through* in 3 to 5 minutes.

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Eat the New Pettijohn's with good top-milk or cream.

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1

Cooks in 3 to 5 minutes.

2

The pick of America s Wheat—contains 25% Natural Bran, with essential Vitamines and Mineral Salts.

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A new and delicious Flavor brought out by pre-cooking.

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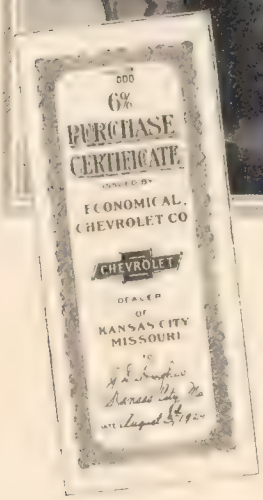

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How needless a disaster! You can regain your youthful silhouette by using Marmola Tablets (thousands of men and women each year regain healthy, slender figures this way). No exercises or diets. Eat what you want, and get slender!

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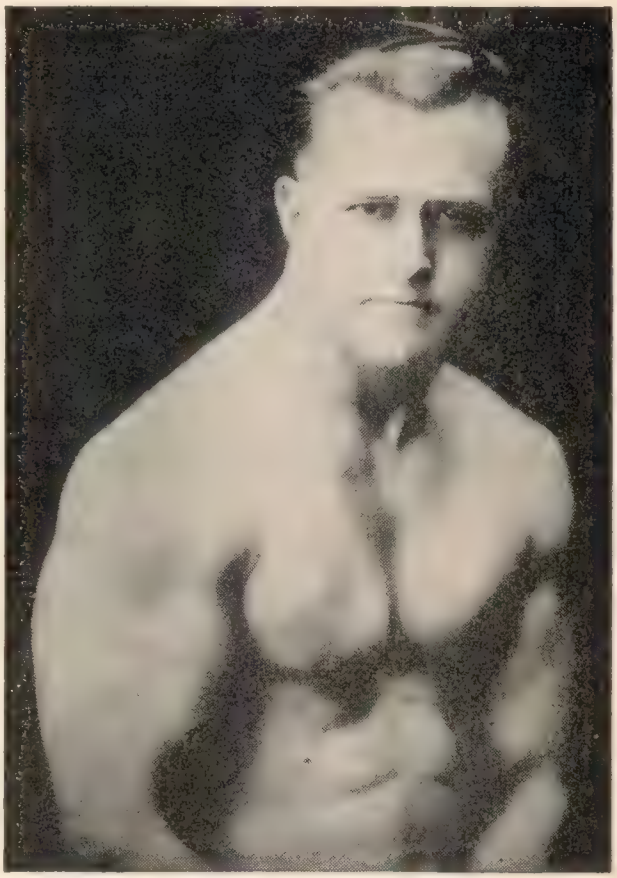
Make your own answer. It's up to you. I know you might be hit on the head with a brick or have someone push you off the end of a dock. But barring accidents, what then? If you take care of any piece of machinery it will last for years—abuse it and you might as well cash it in after the first year. This is just as true of your own body.



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The Muscle Builder

If you do—you die

Go ahead with your careless living if you want. Eat and drink what you like. Abuse your body—it's yours to do with as you please. You may think you're having a good time. But are you? You get up in the morning feeling half dead. You drag yourself through the day and before it's half over you are drowsy and lagging. Get wise to yourself. Don't you know your body is clogging up with poison? Don't you know your lungs are starving for oxygen? Don't you realize your inner cells are breaking down and you are not doing a thing to replenish them? You're dying, man—and you don't know it.

I add years to your life

You need exercise. You must have it. Tie your arm to your side and it will wither away -but use your muscles and you have more muscle to use. The same is true throughout your entire body. Every vital organ is completely surrounded with muscles which make these organs function. Exercise and you strengthen the organ itself. You wear down the dead tissue or cells. The white corpuscles of your blood carry it off and the red corpuscles supply new healthy tissue. You drive death and disease out and bring new life to a worn down and famished body.

You need a teacher

Just any kind of exercise won't do. I have had men come to me who were literally broken down from work in factory or mill. With scientific instruction I brought their bodies back to strength and power.

My system has been tried and proven. It never fails. Some claim, eh? Well, it's true. I don't care what your present condition is. I want you to say: "I'm ready," and I'll knock those microbes in you higher than a cocked hat. I'll shoot you so full of life you'll think you swallowed a stick of dynamite. And muscle? That's my middle name. In three months' time I'll build up every muscle in your body. I'll broaden those shoulders and deepen your chest so that every breath will bring deep loads of oxygen to your lungs, purifying your blood and shooting a thrill throughout your entire system. I'll brighten your eyes and clear your skin. I'll make you so full of life you will feel like shouting out to the world: "I'm a man and I can prove it."

And remember, fellows, I don't just promise these things—I guarantee them. Do you doubt me? Make me prove it. That's what I like, because I know I can do it.

Come on then. Snap into it. Are you ready? Let's go!

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At the root of many a bad temper, there's a corn. It is hard to keep the disposition serene when a corn is jabbing and baiting it with pain You can cover the tip of a corn with a match-head. But this tiny pain-center makes one feel mean all over—and act that way. Doctors know that a corn may irritate the whole nervous system—so the patient with a corn is told to use Blue-jay. A Blue-jay plaster will end a corn pain in ten seconds—and the corn itself in 48 hours

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Pull down the lower eye-lid as illustrated. Unless the inner lid is a bright scarlet, Anemia may exist.

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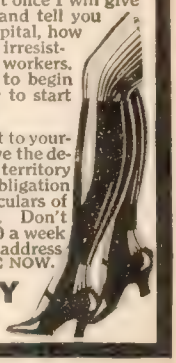

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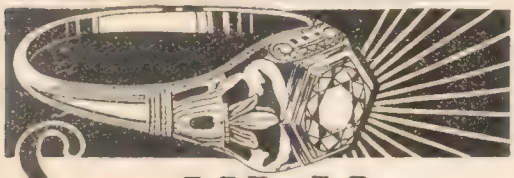

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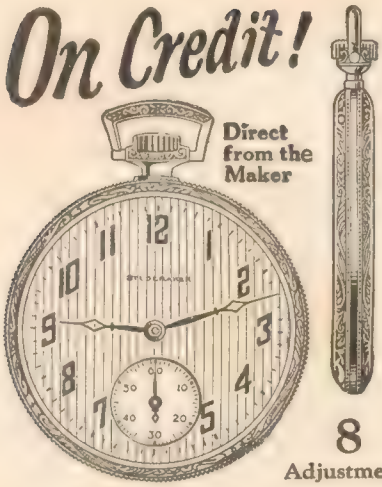

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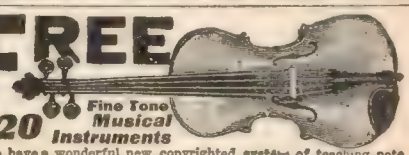

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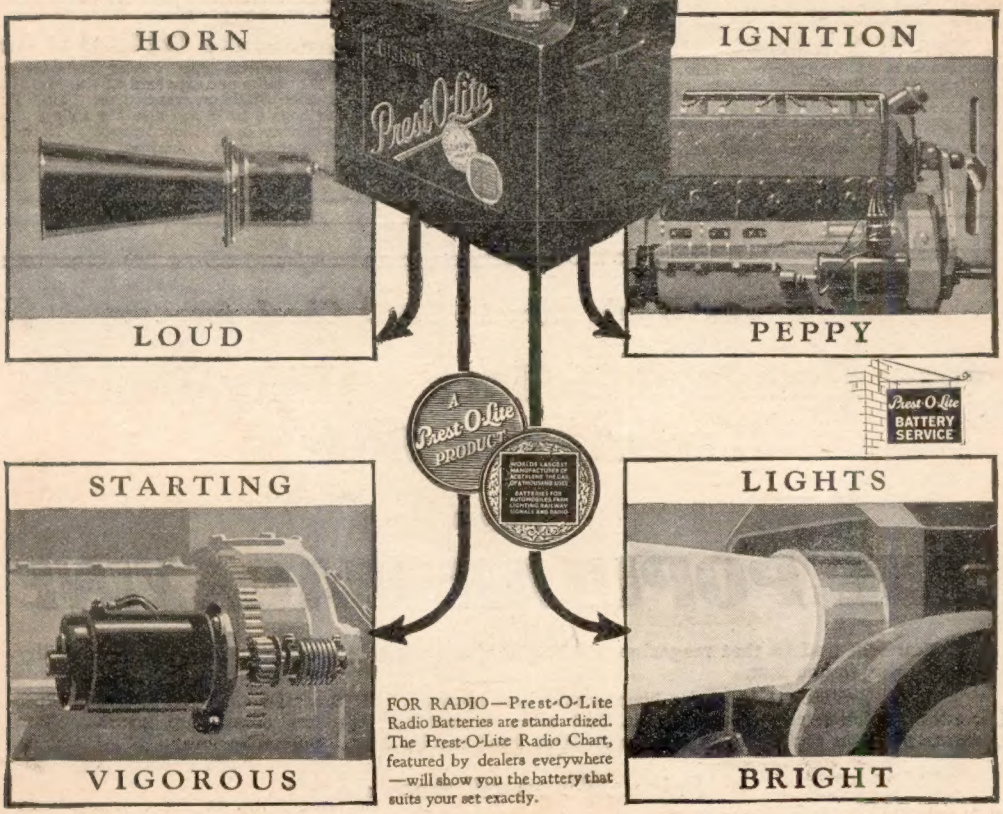

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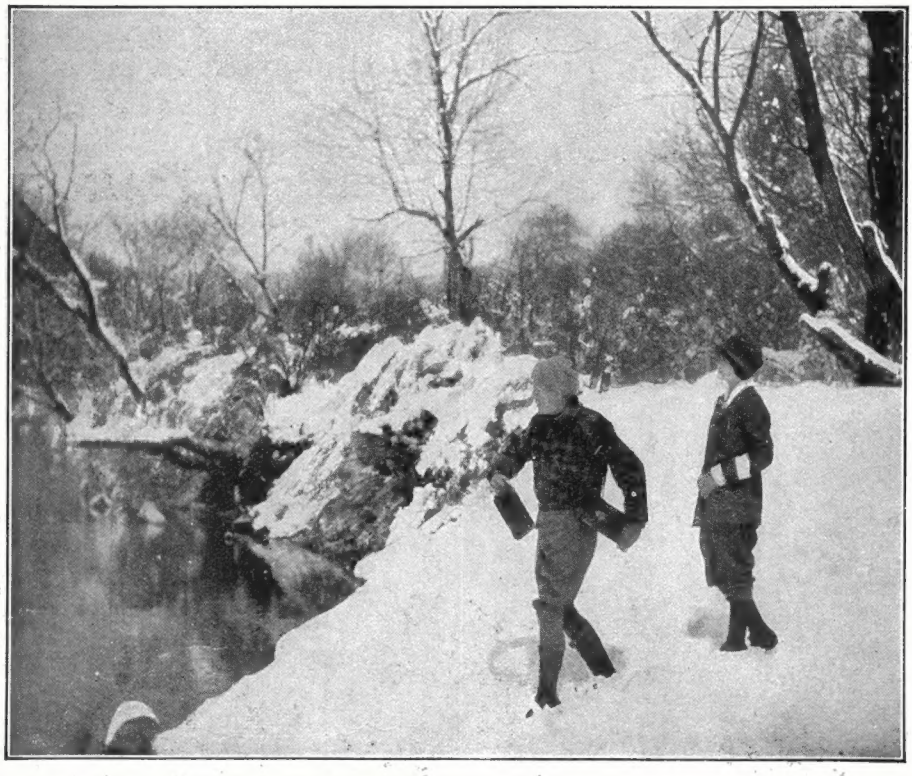

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